WHAT IS A WOMAN?

Daisy Letourneur

I've decided to have a go at answering this question, because for the past few years, people have been trying to take it away from us. Most famously in 2022, when right-wing activist and self-proclaimed theocratic fascist Matt Walsh released a documentary titled "What Is A Woman?" he asked the titular question to various interlocutors, amongst whom of course were conservative figures like Jordan Peterson, but also trans people themselves, recruited via a fake organization that lied about the documentary's intentions.

In France, the same kind of lie was used by journalist Amélie Menu to produce a documentary for the conservative media company *Omerta*, which was supposed to unmask "gender ideology." Despite these dishonest methods and the sensationalism of the documentaries, they reveal nothing that feminist and LGBTI activists and theorists haven't been saying out in the open for decades. Want to know our answer to the question "what is a woman?" We're desperate to make it heard. All you have to do is go and read Monique Wittig, Judith Butler or Julia Serano. Our secret conspiracy is out in the open. In fact, I'm standing in front of you in this public place with a microphone in my hand. I'm no good at keeping secrets, but still, this is not even amateur level.

The idea behind Matt Walsh's documentary is to ridicule the fact that anyone would dare to ask a question whose answer should be, for him and supposedly anyone, so obvious. He wants to broadcast and call out our supposed inability to give a clear, direct and simple answer. This very inability I think should make us proud. I'm going to give what I consider a simple answer to this question sometime later during this talk, but the fact is that I plan to talk for half an hour before doing so, so I'm not really on the simple and concise team.

Problematizing the definition of "woman," Judith Butler's project in *Gender Trouble*, has been a means of emancipation for women and all those who don't fit into the boxes laid down by the heterosexual system, just as before her bell hooks and Black feminists questioned the subject of feminism as imagined by the so-white and so-bourgeoise leaders of the second-wave feminist movement, just as lesbian feminists such as Colette Guillaumin, Nicole Claude Mathieu and Monique Wittig challenged heterosexual feminism.

When Matt Walsh asks the question, it's to stun us with the force of his refusal to think about the answer. Because we're understood as the camp of "ideology," while he presents himself as a man of simple common sense and pragmatism. As said by Raymond Aron: "Ideology is other people's ideas."[1]

Matt Walsh of course has ideas, built on a million years of patriarchy, to back up his ready-made answer. I've got 50 years of lesbian and queer thinking. Who will win?

To rig the fight a little more, I'm not exactly in the same situation as a lot of women who have found their liberation in redefining femininity, in refusing it, in queering it. Many tried to escape femininity, but I did everything I could to be admitted into it. I found a refuge here. Not in the sense that a tradwife seeks the supposed protection of compliance to norms and a domineering husband, but in the sense that being a man was eating me up from the inside. Frankly, it was the worst job I ever had. It was slowly eroding my soul. So I quit. I first had to go through a sort of in-between situation, when you're no longer quite a man but not yet recognized as a woman. It is an even more dangerous situation than just being a woman.

That's no small thing, because to be a woman is to lead a precarious life in a world where men kill us. Where they establish control over our bodies with their laws and their fists. Where they exploit our domestic and reproductive labor. Being a trans woman is even more precarious than that, because even our right to call ourselves women is denied us, even though we are regularly shown that we are considered as such, through attacks on our bodily autonomy, our dignity, our very survival. It's our right to exist that's increasingly being challenged in states like Alabama, like Florida, Missouri or countries like Hungary and Russia, all of which are engaged in a reactionary assault on trans people, LGBTI people, women and children. For this reactionary campaign, the question "What is a Woman?" has become a kind of rallying cry.

Drag bans and the end of Roe v. Wade, "Don't Say Gay" laws and the coming assault on contraception. The current assault on DEI. It's all connected. It all comes from the same people driven by the same simple, common-sense answer to the question "What is a Woman?" And that answer doesn't include the possibility of being queer, child-free, a slut or a girlboss any more than it includes being a trans woman. Sometimes the agents of this offensive in our democratic countries will reveal a little too much by telling us that "The Taliban at least know what a woman is" or "Putin knows," thus aligning themselves with liberticidal fascist regimes. It's not an inconsistency: their project for us is the same. There is indeed a system of thought, common ideas guiding reactionary, anti-feminist, anti-woman, anti-LGBTI forces around the world. And you're going to be able to vote for those ideas in November. Lucky you.[2]

So those are the terms of the debate. Will I really be able to answer the question, without playing their game, without closing the doors through which so many escape to freedom every day? Perhaps not. I'm not much of a theorist. Maybe I don't care so much what the answer is, but I do have an intense desire and a very personal interest in keeping the question open. I care about opening up possibilities rather than closing down thought. Liberation is even more important to me than theory. What I'm going to do, then, is try to explain to you where I am today, how I got here and what enables me to hold on in the face of the precariousness of our lives.

For me, it all started with the question:

"What is a man?"

I came to this question around 2017 when I launched a feminist blog dedicated to masculinities. I'd been struggling to find my place among men all my life, and at the time it felt like I'd finally succeeded. Just about. I was married, I had a little boy, and an apartment. I almost had a job. And I told myself I'd managed to have all that without being as arrogant, as violent and misogynistic as many of the men around me.

I felt I'd had to find my way mostly without a role model, by listening to the women around me and reading feminists, because no man spoke to men like me (obviously, I now have an opinion on why that was the case). So I created that blog to address him, the straight cis man who was looking to be a little less of an asshole. When, a few months later, the #MeToo movement broke out, I found myself faced with a media landscape in search of "deconstructed," "feminist" male role models, which opened its arms to me. No sooner had women's voices begun to be heard than we were dying to give men the mic once again. There were positions available, cards to play for men who wanted to get ahead of the game by rebranding themselves as feminists. And strangely enough, while I was perfectly positioned to profit from it, I really felt out of place. Pretty soon, I found myself plunged into a state of deep malaise. Fortunately, I eventually found the solution to my problem: I obviously had no desire to be a man, so I stopped being one.

To the accusations of some feminists who believe that trans women have a "primary male socialization" that predisposes them to take up all the space in feminine spaces they would invade, trans author Imogen Binnie answers in her seminal 2013 novel *Nevada* with a portrait of women raised as boys against their will, who never knew what to do with the privileges the world offered them, and who for years before their transition made themselves as small as possible, became self-effacing people, unable to assert themselves, and who even after their transition remain those self-effacing women, doubting their legitimacy at every step, who will never be a model of proud, strong feminists. In my experience, there are far more of them than the extroverted minority and, having myself struggled for years with a paralyzing shyness that may not be apparent today, I knew this portrait for having seen it in the mirror most of my life.

Because I didn't want to become one of those trans women assigned to testimony, I didn't want to be reduced to my biography, disqualified from the theory race before the starting line because of my singular position, I continued to write about the club I no longer belonged to: cis men. And if I already knew that no longer being in their ranks would force me to double my efforts before finding myself in front of a microphone once again, I also discovered how questioning the norm from the sidelines liberates and enriches analysis.

Today I know what it's like to walk like a man in a way I didn't know before my transition because I've learned to walk another way. I know what it's like to be listened to like a man since I've experienced being ignored as a woman. I know that you can't remain a man and totally refuse to receive the dividends of masculinity, because so much of it is invisible, unthought, offered by the world

whether one accepts it or not. As a trans woman, I know all too well how much I have, with a paradoxical euphoria, lost.

I also discovered that by talking about men in this way, I was inevitably going to talk about me anyway, about my background and about the trans experience. I learned that you can't ask yourself what it is to be a man without asking yourself what it is to be a woman, and that you can't ask yourself these questions seriously today, whether from the point of view of sociology, biology or history, without coming to the conclusion that trans people are just as much women and men as cis people (and no, I'm not going to go into that again, others have already explained it much better than I could, and I don't want to have to justify my existence every time I speak).

This deeply trans aspect of my work doesn't seem so obvious to the majority of my cis readers, who appear to have read my book *On ne naît pas mec* as a book about cis men first and foremost. That's fine, that was always the plan. But it's also a book that, according to several readers I've met, has helped more than one trans man figuring out his relationship to other men. More often, it has helped women at the beginning of their transition or even put some of them on the path. And I couldn't be prouder or happier than when they tell me that. I became that person who writes for "men like me," except that "men like me" turned out not to be men.

In writing this book, I also developed the beginnings of a theory that I ended up not including. Because the book didn't need it, because I wasn't sure enough about it and because it would have required historical research that I simply didn't have the time to do. Today, I haven't gone much further in researching this subject, but I'd like to tell you about it anyway, if you'd be so kind as to bear with me. Think of it as my non-academic privilege: we're allowed to write just about anything in our books. And this isn't even a book, I'm just talking here with you.

During my research into French materialist feminism of the 70's and 80's, I've discovered what women are made for. Why gender, as a singular word meaning a class system, exists and produces two gendered categories. And I think it's pretty essential to have this answer in order to answer the question "what is a woman?" which, you may have forgotten since I started telling my life story, is our goal at this hour.

The short version is that women are needed so that men can exploit them and that men are needed so that women can be exploited by them.

That's where I left things off in my book, which is ultimately about gender and not much else, but gender is not a system that operates in a vacuum, without any grip on the rest of society or influence from other systems of exploitation — racism, capitalism, ableism, etc… Men and women also exist to perpetuate these systems. In particular, I'd like to talk about capitalism and war, and show that men also exist to be workers and soldiers. And at a time which, in many parts of the world, is reminiscent of the 1930s when the alliance of capitalists and fascist regimes led us to some of the worst times in the West's history, I think it's time to take a look at how all of this combines with gender.

I wrote in my book about human emotions and the so-called male alexithymia: the inability to connect with, recognize, understand and control one's

own feelings. This term, coined to refer to a condition found in autistic people in particular, has proved useful for some psychologists in describing what's going on for many men. Allow me to quote a few French statistics: while 8.9% of French women have undergone psychotherapy in their lifetime, only 4.9% of men have, according to the *Haut Conseil de la Santé Publique* (Kovess-Masfety and Husky). Perhaps because talking about one's emotions or reaching out for help isn't really a male habit.

Here in the USA, psychologists Carol Gilligan and Niobé Way have shown how men cut themselves off from their emotions during childhood and adolescence through very simple and direct mechanisms, such as the "Boys don't cry" injunction, but also through the building of mutual distrust that comes to stand between boys. This isolation has serious consequences for cis men. When you don't confide in anyone, when you refuse to ask for help, when you see yourself as strong because you're independent, you die younger. This is one of many things that leads to a higher rate of male suicide, substance abuse and shorter lifespans. Something that is true across nations, but even more so in countries like South Korea or Russia where gender norms are enforced with even more strictness than elsewhere.

Far from feeling sorry for men, French sociologist Léo Thiers-Vidal has shown how, rather than simply being passive victims of their emotional aridity, heterosexual men are often aware of the power it can give them over women and use it wisely to get what they want: distilling demonstrations of affection to make them more precious: not talking to their partner for a week because they've had a fight: making passionate promises of love when their partners are trying to leave after an argument or a beating. These are patterns found in many heterosexual relationships, whether toxic, abusive, violent or supposedly "healthy." Think of the stereotype of the "strong silent type" embodied by the John Wayne type or by Don Draper in the *Mad Men* series. By making their demonstrations of love a scarce resource, they put themselves in a position of strength in front of heterosexual women conditioned to beg for these precious tokens of affection.

That's what I wrote about in my book, but I think there are other reasons for this alexithymia in men. The first is to make them good workers. Sociologist Kris Paap spent three years on construction sites as a carpenter, among white men who define themselves by their "pigness." They bonded over their shared misogyny, racism and virilism. Their solidarity was restrictive, excluding women and men of color who'd work along with them.

These men's practices on construction sites include non-compliance with safety standards they see as infantilizing, emasculating, and imposed from above by a hierarchy they consider feminized. Regardless of whether this hierarchy is male or female, it's not manly because real men work on site and show their physical strength. A common practice of hazing on construction sites: making newcomers spend their first day without a helmet, putting themselves in danger just to prove they've got balls. It's not enough to show you can stand up to hierarchical authority by resisting rules, even when these rules have been imposed thanks to the collective struggle of worker's unions in a bid to protect them, you also have to show that you are the strongest, the most productive, even if it means

ignoring pain, tiredness and injuries. This is a way working-class masculinity plays into the hands of employers and facilitates capitalist exploitation. And we can find avatars of these attitudes that are just as favorable to capitalist exploitation in the service sector, in offices, in management... wherever men are put to work.

It's worth pointing out that this observation runs counter to a more traditional vision of the workers' liberation movement. Historically, trade unionism has also drawn on masculinist representations of strong, proud, indomitable male bodies. A revolutionary vision of male workers who are more resistant to authority than women, more supportive of each other and with more stamina to "hold" a strike conceived as a confrontation of will between strong men. What is this masculine camaraderie worth if its victories are unmade every day by the application of these same virile values? Manly anticapitalism may be less productive than we think.

Meanwhile women have of course always worked and fought for better working conditions. But this is a story that is generally less told. Remembering that the Russian Revolution of 1917 began with a movement of female textile workers should prevent us from believing that men are particularly suited to anti-capitalist struggle. All too often, they are the perfect tools of their own exploitation.

In the same way that masculinity makes men good workers for the capitalist class, it also makes good soldiers out of them. For what is a soldier if not a worker of death? To research this point, I found myself doing some not-so-fun things: reading military sociology and listening to historians of Nazi Germany. What I have gathered from this rapid overview of historians and sociologist's conceptions of the German people and particularly its army, is an effort by today's intellectuals to "re-Nazify" the Nazis. For a long time, the Wehrmacht was seen as an army like any other, obeying orders out of loyalty, not Nazi conviction. Today, historians are challenging this depoliticized view of the war in a necessary effort to mitigate the postwar will to go back to business as usual. Taking the Nazis' beliefs seriously shows their roots were all over Europe and the USA, an uncomfortable truth now that must have been even less easy to swallow in 1945.

I particularly wondered about the cohesion of the Wehrmacht's units, what kept these brothers-in-arms together until 1945, when atrocities were a daily occurrence and defeat more and more inevitable. The first sociological interpretation given by Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, founders of military sociology, was that the German army held together not because its soldiers were particularly attached to Nazi beliefs but because of a sense of belonging, the camaraderie and solidarity of men who live together, fight together, and die together.

This interpretation appealed to me at first because it reminded me of the Boys Club concept that we feminists often mobilize to describe the solidarity of men who form homosocial groups in their private and professional lives, in formal and informal clubs, in which women, queers and other minorities are marginalized. These boys' clubs stand shoulder to shoulder in the face of anything that might be perceived as a threat, an attack from outside, such as a member of

the club being accused of rape. One strand of liberal feminist discourse places its hopes on male allies willing to disassociate themselves from their brothers-in-arms in this situation.

One famous example in France of male solidarity is that of Emmanuel Macron, in the face of feminist criticism of his choice of Gérald Darmanin as Minister of the Interior when the latter was very credibly accused of a couple of statutory rapes. The French president explained that he had had a conversation about "the reality of the facts" with his new police chief which allowed him to establish a "man-to-man relationship of trust" with him. On the other hand, a famous example of a straight cis man breaking male solidarity is. . . Sorry, oddly enough I can't think of one right now.

But let's get back to our Nazis. At least since the 1990s, this vision of the Werhmacht has been criticized. The Israeli historian Omar Bartov has shown that defeats on the Russian front and the decimation of German units led to a high turnover, which prevented this camaraderie from taking root. According to him, what kept German soldiers together was twofold: on the one hand, their strong belief in the Nazi project and its ideology, which made them something very different from the original conception of "an army like any other." On the other hand was a "perverse discipline," which kept them together by firstly being extremely tough on "cowards" and deserters (one common practice was explaining to soldiers who may be tempted to become deserters that if they defected, all their remaining comrades would be killed) and secondly being just as extremely lenient with individual war crimes and other acts of brutality and cruelty committed against civilians and soldiers on the other side. Life as a German soldier was hard, but they were rewarded with the right to cruelty.

I'm not here to give you an amateurish history lesson on Nazism, though. But I thought this detour would be interesting to feed into a critique of a liberal vision of feminism, which relies on men's individual efforts to break ranks, refuse to be a man and disassociate themselves from aggressors, rapists and misogynists. If, as explained above, I would only handle with many precautions the concept of a "cost of masculinity" because what one may see as a cost could just as well be a tool for men, I don't hesitate to talk about the cost of defection. The notion of perverse discipline allows us to better understand male solidarity beyond the "boys club." It's not just men standing up for their friends. Firstly, we see men standing by each other well beyond their own personal circle. When Emmanuel Macron, once again, announces his support for actor Gérard Depardieu in the face of the many accusations of rape and abuse levelled at him, it's not, as far as I know, because they have drinks together every Sunday. It's because they belong to the same social class, the white, bourgeois, male class. It's because he sees it as a political issue, a symbol of masculinity to be defended against feminist assaults.

That's why breaking male solidarity means exposing yourself to punishment: it's not just a matter of individual relationships, it's a political issue. That's why we train little boys to be virile men, and why we teach them to be disgusted and to discriminate against effeminate and homosexual men. And at the same time, being more misogynistic than others, committing aggression and

violence, is often a good way of integrating into the group. It reinforces solidarity. I'm not trying to say that all men are like Nazis, but I will say that all men are trained to have a masculine *esprit de corps* that extends beyond their immediate social circle to all gender conforming males. They're taught to be good soldiers, to live with the knowledge of the horrors their social group inflicts on women and to desensitize themselves to it. To take pleasure in the right to abuse, staying in lane, gives them and/or fear the punishment of straying from the path. A lot of them resist this in small and not so small ways. A lot of them find it's a fair deal.

That's why, in my research into masculinist communities, I was struck by the recurrence of murderous, terrorist heroes. Elliot Rodger in 2014, one of many incel mass shooters. André Fourquet in 1969 in France, who killed his children and himself to punish his wife for daring to leave him, and in doing so birthed the French "fathers' rights" movements. There are hundreds of others, right up to the accusations of violence that have given rise to the "legend" of Andrew Tate. These figures of executioners become martyrs.

Because masculinity is a tool of military imperialism, which has always been exploited by the military and colonialism, because it is both the ideology of natural superiority and of glorious destiny that justifies everything, because it is the perverse discipline that prevents questioning, disassociating oneself from men therefore requires a radical act, that will ensure your removal from all rights and privileges granted when you were assigned male at birth.

Being gay can be one of those acts, even if within certain narrow parameters one can now manage to be the "right kind" of gay today. My own solution was to become a woman.

Transition doesn't make you a good soldier. In fact, that's one of the reasons Donald Trump tried to act against covering transition medical costs in the U.S. military (the main reason being, let's face it, that it was the first button he could push in his global anti-trans project).[3]

I can't begin to count among my trans friends the brilliant people who have had to give up their careers and studies because of transphobia. It appears transition does not make you a welcome worker in the capitalist system, if the figures on trans people's joblessness are to be believed.

Transition is not, as some anti-trans conspiracy nuts claim, part of a global transhumanist project. Elon Musk wouldn't hate us so much if that were the case. We don't change our bodies to be more productive. We change to survive.

Worse: we don't reproduce. Or not properly. And that's another problem, which brings us back to our initial question: what is a woman? A woman isn't meant to be a soldier. She's the one who's supposed to make more little soldiers.

Women are bellies for the nation

I don't know if you've noticed, but eugenics is having a moment. A sort of neo-eugenicist thinking is popping up everywhere where people have just a little too much power. Most visibly in the strange amalgam of outrageously stupid and fascist ideas of the TESCREALists[4] in Silicon Valley, but also in the racism-fueled discourse of great replacement conspiracy thinkers, you find it in "race realist" pseudo academics and in tradwives' Tik Toks, in old fashioned anti-

Semitic books and in Israeli government policies. You can spot the neo-eugenists trends in Hungary's Viktor Orban's policies and sometimes more subtly among the liberals who simply "ask questions." In short, a whole bunch of people who are already or will end up agreeing with Matt Walsh and his project to reappropriate the question of femininity.

Of course, this takes different forms. There's the openly eugenicist idea of degeneration, the fear of idiocracy that would come through the uncontrolled reproduction of the masses and the infertility of elites. With more or less explicit racism, depending on whether you come to these ideas out of fear of the "great replacement" or out of the conviction that your wealth reflects the natural and undeniable superiority of your genes.

You probably believe very strongly in the importance of IQ without really knowing the history of this scale and the criticisms of its limitations and historical use. You probably don't want to listen to anti-racists voices on the history of fertility control. You've probably never heard the words of a single anti-ableist activist, who could tell you a thing or two about who has the right to live, survive and reproduce and who has not.

At the heart of the current anti-trans panic is the question of fertility. In France, the last and only time trans people won rights written in law in the 21st century was when, in 2016, we wrestled the de-medicalization of the procedures for change of civil status. To put it plainly, this means that we no longer need to prove to the judge who declares us officially, in the eye of the State, a man or a woman, that a surgeon has performed a vaginoplasty or a hysterectomy on us. In practice, it was blackmail for sterilization: we can make your life a lot easier, give you a bit of security, but you must assure us that you won't be able to reproduce anymore.

This welcome change in the law, however, opened up a series of gender troubles in French administration and justice system once we actually started reproducing. What should be written on the birth certificate of a child carried by a father? What should the administration do when a newborn has two mothers when we're still struggling with cis lesbian mothers?

One of the most striking episodes in the anti-trans media panic in France was the distribution of a Planned Parenthood poster depicting a pregnant trans man. Many believed, or pretended to believe, that we were trying to tell them that trans women could bear children. Many have maintained a position of confusion, of willful imbecility, reminiscent of Matt Walsh's request for simplicity. A man can't get pregnant because women get pregnant. Period. And if this controversy has turned into an attack on Planned Parenthood, its already endangered funding in France, and women's ability to access abortion, that's hardly an unwelcome side-effect for these people.

The anti-trans movement doesn't want us to reproduce, but we shouldn't think it's anti-birth. Eugenics is always balancing between two goals: to reduce "bad births" and to encourage "good births." At the same time as they're panicking about a trans woman impregnating a cis woman and trans men getting pregnant, there is also the overblown fear of mass sterilization of a generation of little girls who could have been fit to bear children, by giving them puberty

blockers and testosterone, and removing their breasts and uteruses, which were made to carry life.

As Andrea Long Chu recently wrote in her article "Freedom of Sex" for *New York Magazine:*

> I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the anti-trans movement is driven by a deep, unconscious dread that society will not have enough working female biology to support the deteriorating nuclear family—and, with it, the entire division of sex itself.

As this article shows, it's no coincidence that the people behind anti-trans legislation in both the US and France are also those who are fighting against abortion. It's a concerted assault on the same principles: bodily autonomy, especially for minors, and the freedom not to bear children. When your answer to "What is a woman?" is "the one who bears children," abortion and contraception are as much of a "gender trouble" as trans people's existence.

In practice, eugenics comes down to deciding who has the right and duty to reproduce and who doesn't. It forces us to take an intersectional approach, as it blithely mixes sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia. When they attack abortion, it's not to make it so that women of color will have more children. I'm going to talk about Emmanuel Macron once again, as one of my goals during this trip is to ruin his reputation here. He recently announced that he was worried about the fertility of French men and women, blaming biology for the drop in the national birth rate (obviously not taking into account the role that his policy of mass impoverishment and defunding of social services can play a part in our decisions about whether or not to have children). He announced his intention of "relaunching France through the birth rate" and used the words "demographic rearmament." These words are those of Viktor Orbàn, head of the Hungarian state and model for many a wannabe Western dictator. For Orbàn, "demographic rearmament" is the answer to an obsession: the disappearance of the Hungarian people, obviously imagined as white, Christian and heterosexual which is supposedly threatened by immigration, the falling birth rate, women's rights and LGBTI people. One might think that Emmanuel Macron, who has always claimed to be of a more open liberal tradition, guided solely by economic imperatives, doesn't put the same ideas behind his "demographic rearmament." Yet at the same time, as the French president deplores the decline in French fertility, the State is running a campaign to encourage sterilization in its African department of Mayotte, where the birth of numerous non-white children is seen as a problem.

In Israel, this neo-eugenics thinking is seen in the midst of war, with the creation of a unit dedicated to collecting sperm from soldiers wounded or killed in action. Amidst the horrors of the ongoing massacre, the preservation of Israeli genetic material for the production of future little soldiers carrying the right genes is therefore a priority over the preservation of existing lives. Of Palestinian lives in any case.

In South Korea, the country with the lowest birth rate in the world, the government has published a "national birth map" showing the number of women

of childbearing age in each municipality. As if every uterus not carrying a fetus were an untapped resource waiting to be put to work.

As nationalism raises ominous flags around the world in 2024, and the drums of war become increasingly deafening, they also act as a reminder of the biological needs of armies. They need us to produce cannon fodder. Able-bodied men to kill and be killed. Women at home to raise them, feed them and send them off to the front with a proud, emotional look on their faces. And that's where we come back to our question of the definition of women. But we're not just going to ask "what" but "why and what for?"

A certain definition of "woman" has become a slogan in the transphobic movements stemming from feminism (a far distant origin at this point, so far from their original ideas has their new hobbyhorse taken them). Defiantly printed on t-shirts and mugs, they tell us that "Woman = adult human female." A definition straight out of an unspecified dictionary which is perfectly circular. They're saying it to exclude trans women, but I'm an adult too, I'm human, I'm female. At least, that's what my papers say, that's what most people who interact with me think and, thanks to hormones, that's how I should be considered medically when I walk through the door of a doctor's office.

There is no non-circular definition of sex to be found in a dictionary simply because there is no non-circular definition of anything in any dictionary. "Woman" is just a word just like "chair" and "sandwich." The definition of "freedom" depends on the definition of "free," which depends on the definition of "freedom." A word that exists only in reference to other words, in a set of signifiers from which most of us still manage to somehow derive meaning. The "adult human female" definition serves the same purpose as the question in Matt Walsh's mouth: to close the conversation in a perfect loop, impervious to any challenge, any thought outside the system. A woman is a female who is a woman. Now stop thinking.

I'm more interested in the question of why, and more precisely the "what for," which finally takes us out of the loop. We're not just playing with words now. We can start to think. We have shown above three answers to the question "What are men for?": men exist to exploit women, to be exploited by capitalism, and to be exploited by the military.

In the same logic, women exist to be exploited in the household. To be exploited by capitalism. And to produce new humans to exploit. When the mask comes off—and it's rarely convincingly worn—it's also the answer to the "What is a Woman?" question posed by fascists and eugenicists: a woman is the one who "carries life." Their true definition isn't tautological, it's teleological: we need a group in society to carry the burden of perpetuating the species, and since they already carry children for nine months, this will be women's role. Finally, we're talking about the same thing, and we have a position that we can really analyze.

If women are exploited for their wombs, then divorce, abortion and contraception are just as serious an attack on the traditional definition of "woman" than trans people's existence is. And that's probably why their abolition is the supreme goal of feminism's enemies.

When as trans people, we say "I'm a man" or "I'm a woman," it's seen as a violent attack on patriarchy. We assert our bodily autonomy, our refusal of biological assignment to a destiny, a role in the production of little workers and little soldiers that should be ours. We're kicking the house of cards down. And that's why they want to deny us this right, why they want to put us back in our place. Our very existence calls into question the naturalness and inevitability of assignment to a sex, to a role in the system of reproductive exploitation, in the capitalist system, in the system of war. If it's known, if it's seen that we can not only want to transition, but do so and live fulfilled, happy lives, what will all those women we've assigned to produce babies for us think? What will those men we've trained to be remorseless killers or obedient workers think? Perhaps they too will start to transgress the order of things?

Finally, I'll give you my answer, as a trans woman, to the question "what is a woman?," and it's a circular answer, something I'm perfectly fine with. So there it is: a woman is someone who calls herself a woman, who is called a woman, who is perceived as a woman, who is treated as a woman.

It's up to us to make it so that being treated as a woman is no longer a condemnation to a less radiant, less rich, less fulfilling destiny. It's up to us to make it so that one day "being treated like a woman" no longer means anything. And that day, what should be our answer to the question "what are women for?" They will not be made for men. Or for capitalism or for war. Women will exist for themselves.

Refusing to be a soldier

Before I end this talk, I'd like to tell you about two trans women. The first one you've probably heard of. Her name is Chelsea Manning. In revealing the extent of US soldier's abuses against Iraqi civilians in 2010, she courageously committed an act of treason that would earn her seven years of imprisonment. Seven years of her life were lost because her sense of justice was more important to her than loyalty to a monstrous military command and a criminal army. I don't think it's a coincidence that the woman who refused to be a good soldier on the day she sent confidential documents to Wikileaks did so at the same time she refused to be a man.

The second person I'd like to tell you about, you may know as Aaron Bushnell. This is the person who, on February 25th, set themselves on fire live on Twitch to protest against the genocide still taking place in Gaza with the support of the American state, the French state and most Western states. On Discord, Bushnell called herself Lily and used he/him and she/her pronouns. On the day of her death, she heroically refused to be a good soldier.

I'm not asking you to do what they did. I don't think the mass transition of cis men into trans women is a realistic solution to anything. I'm certainly not asking you to set yourself on fire. And I hope you won't spend seven years of your life in prison.

But these days the Governor of Alabama and the Alabama Senate are trying to make it so that your university can no longer legally invite a trans person like me to tell you all of this. They want to make it so you will no longer be allowed

to hear that "nature" is earth, that race is a social construct with the purpose of oppression and exploitation, that this country was built by black slave labor. Faced with a "what" question you will no longer have the right to ask "why?" and "what for?"

I support you in whatever you will do to fight this, and I sincerely hope you won't let this happen here.

Notes

[1] "L'idéologie est l'idée de mon adversaire" (Aron 35).

[2] Note from 2025: Well, not so lucky, it turns out. Consider me morbidly sorry.

[3] In 2025, he's unfortunately gone much further in this project.

[4] "Transhumanism, Extropianism, Singularitarianism, Cosmism, Rationalist ideology, Effective Altruism, and Longtermism."

Works Cited

Aron, Raymond. "L'idéologie." *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, vol. 16, no. 43, 1978, pp. 35-50.

Bartov, Omer. *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*. Oxford UP, 1994.

Binnie, Imogen. *Nevada: A Novel*. Topside Press, 2013.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1989.

Chu, Andrea Long. "Freedom of Sex." *New York Magazine*, 21 Mar. 2024, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/trans-rights-biological-sex-gender-judith-butler.html.

Kovess-Masfety, Viviane, and Mathilde Husky. "Recours à la psychothérapie en France: résultats d'une enquête épidémiologique dans quatre régions." *Actualité et dossier en santé publique (Adsp) : Revue trimestrielle du haut conseil de la santé publique*, vol. 97, Dec. 2016, pp. 10–15.

Letourneur, Daisy. *La Mecxspliqeuse*, https://lamecxpliqueuse.wordpress.com/. Accessed 23 May 2025.

---. *On ne naît pas mec : Petit traité féministe sur les masculinités*. La Découverte, 2022.

Menu, Amelie and Alexandre De Galzain, directors. *Trans: La Confusion des genres*. Omerta Media, 2022.

Paap, Kris. *Working Construction: Why White Working-Class Men Put Themselves-and the Labor Movement-in Harm's Way Kris Paap*. Cornell UP, 2018.

Shils, Edward A., and Morris Janowitz. "Cohesion and disintegration in the wehrmacht in World War II." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2, summer 1948, pp. 280–315, https://doi.org/10.1086/265951.

Thiers-Vidal, Léo. *De « L'Ennemi Principal » aux principaux ennemis : Position vécue, subjectivité et conscience masculines de domination*. L'Harmattan, 2010.

Walsh, Matt, director. *What Is a Woman?* The Daily Wire, 2022.
Way, Niobe, Alisha Ali, Carol Gilligan and Pedro Noguera, editors. *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions.* New York UP, 2018.