

Book Review

The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice

The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice. By Shon Faye. Penguin Random House UK, 2021. Pp. 292. ISBN: 978-0-241-42314-1.

Review by Jeremy Patrick*

A substantial amount of the discussion about religious freedom in Australian politics over the past few years has occurred in the context of the supposed ‘culture war’ clash of religious freedom versus transgender rights. As same-sex marriage has faded into the background, the question of how religious schools should respond to transgender students and staff has come to the fore of legal, political, and media controversy. However, it can be valuable to step back from the details of a specific controversy by viewing it through a broader lens. Shon Faye’s *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice*¹ is a powerful articulation of the issues facing transgender people today. Faye, a British trans woman, provides a highly-readable account of how trans liberation should be seen as part and parcel of the broader struggle against oppression in its various incarnations.

The major theme of Faye’s book is that the ‘moral panic’ about trans people is a distraction from the very real struggles they face. Pundits and politicians obsess endlessly over toilets and elite sporting competitions, says Faye, while ignoring family violence and rejection, poverty and homelessness, school bullying and workplace harassment, and a host of other issues that directly and substantially affect trans people at levels far exceeding that of the general population. Faye positions trans people as one of many marginalised groups that need to work together to overcome capitalist and patriarchal oppression. Class, race, and an understanding of intersectionality is key to this analysis. Elites may be keen to discuss pronouns in e-mail signatures, but for many trans people, safety and shelter are far more pressing concerns.

As Faye explains,

The experience of being trans is shaped by social class. While there are middle-class trans people, the vast majority are working class — just as the vast majority of the total population is working class. Trans workers are often employed in lower paid and more precarious jobs, with a high risk of discrimination and bullying in the workplace. As a result, trans political struggle is part of a wider class struggle. Despite this, trans politics is commonly misrepresented as coddled, bourgeois, and anti-working class.²

To support the theme, chapters are devoted to trans healthcare (physical and mental), discriminatory legislation, the sex work industry, and more. One chapter is devoted to the place of trans rights within the LGBTIQ+ movement generally, while another discusses the subset of the feminist movement which holds essentialist biological views of sex and gender (the J.K. Rowlings of the world). Religion is a topic rarely discussed in the book, but the

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¹ Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (Penguin Random House UK, 2021).

² Ibid 119.

perhaps surprising alliance between religious conservatives and secular anti-trans feminist campaigners is covered over several pages.

Some aspects of the book may limit its appeal to readers of this journal. The work is clearly one of advocacy, not journalism or scholarship. It is written for a mainstream audience, not an academic one, and the intersection of law and religion is only touched on. Most of the examples and statistics are from the United Kingdom, leaving an Australian reader unsure of whether or to what degree the situation is similar here. Class-based analyses are less predominant in the academy than they used to be, so some may find the core thesis unpersuasive.

But despite these limitations, *The Transgender Issue* is certainly worth reading. Transgender people are not going anywhere and the religious, political, and legal controversies about their place in society seem likely to persist throughout the decade. Advocates for any position can benefit from a healthy dose of compassion and understanding. Whatever ‘side’ of these issues someone is on, obtaining a better, more well-rounded picture of the struggles transgender people face will be worthwhile.