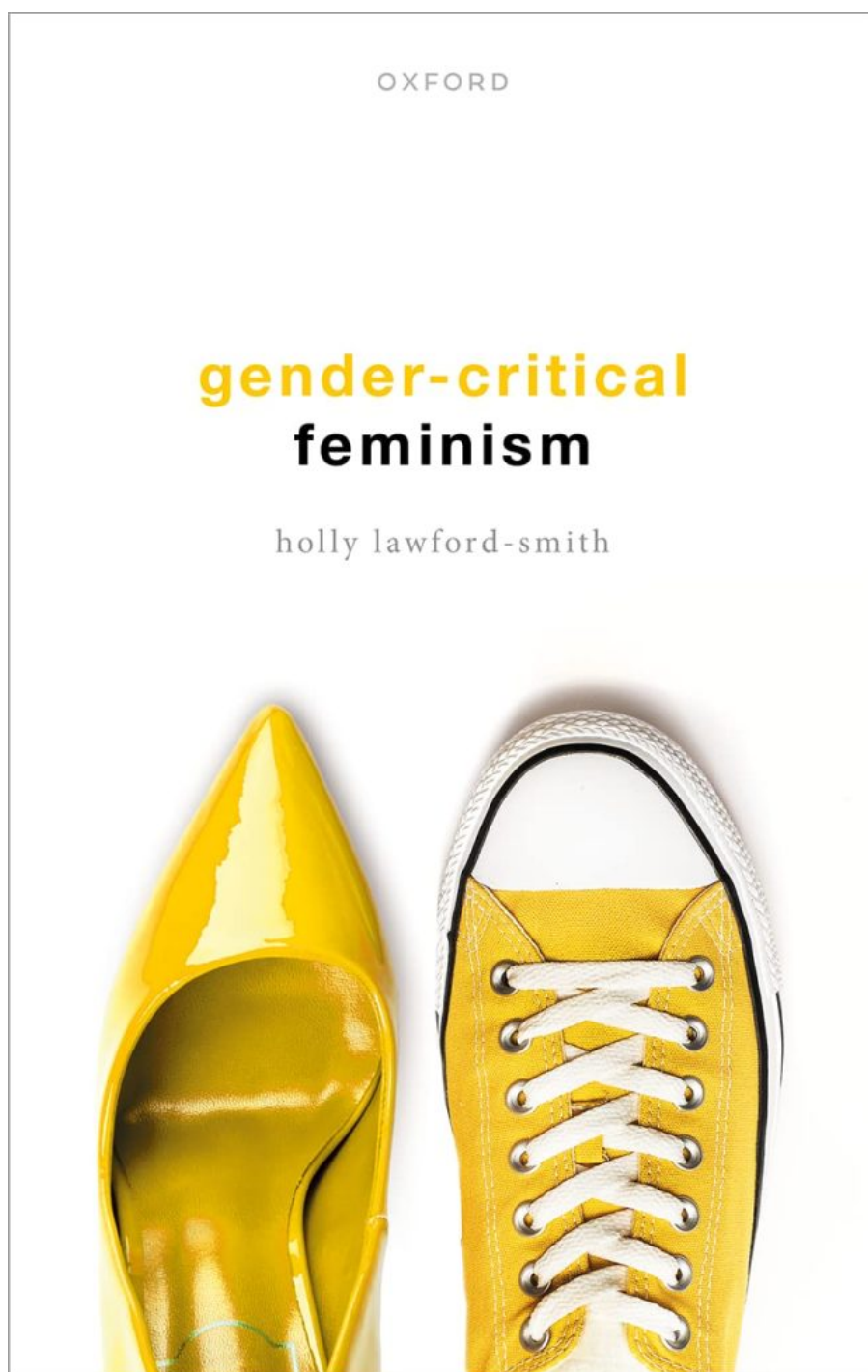


Open Letter From a Closed Mind



by Theodore Dalrymple

For the moment—though for how long, one does not know—the Oxford University Press is sticking to its guns. Good for it! In these days of moral cowardice that is both profound and

widespread, even a cartilaginous backbone seems like a rod of iron.

The Press says that, despite protests, it will continue to publish a book titled *Gender-Critical Feminism* by Holly Lawford-Smith. I must admit that when I first read this title, I thought of the reply of the policeman who was breaking up a communist demonstration to one of the demonstrators who protested that he was an anti-communist: "I don't care what kind of communist you are." But I suppressed this thought, for this was not germane to the matter in hand.

I have not read the book and therefore can say nothing about its quality, though from what I gather it claims that a man who would like to be a woman cannot transform himself into one by medical means. There will always be an *as if* quality to his efforts. A transgender person never becomes a person of the opposite sex just like any other. Who knows of what miracles genetic engineering may one day be capable, but for the moment this truth remains what Marxists used to call an iron law of history.

This truth that a man who changes into a woman never becomes a woman *simpliciter*—which even a few years ago would hardly have been considered worthwhile to say, so evident was it—is now astonishingly contentious. By some, even to utter it is now taken as a sign of irredeemable viciousness and moral depravity.

An academic, Dr. Eugenia Zuroski, has coordinated an open letter to the Oxford University Press, now apparently endorsed by 800 academics and writers, protesting its publication of Lawford-Smith's book. It is worth quoting:

"Gender-critical" feminism is not a scholarly field, but a coordinated political intervention, unsubstantiated by peer-reviewed research in the field of gender, sexuality, queer, and trans studies, that promotes itself by the deliberate

sowing of “controversy” without being held accountable for the very real and dangerous consequences of these discourses for entire demographics of human beings. By responding to the book’s...release, we do not “censor ideas” but stand firmly in support of trans people’s right to live freely, without harassment, abuse or terrorization.

Written in language that makes the average legal contract seem like Raymond Chandler, the letter (most of which I have perforce omitted) goes on to say:

As it [the book] is being marketed under both Social Sciences and Arts & Humanities on the OUP website, in the fields of Philosophy, Politics, and Sociology and specifically in the interdisciplinary fields of Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, we would expect a press of OUP’s reputation to incorporate expertise of a wide range of specialists in feminist theory and gender and sexuality studies... We would expect the due diligence of consultation with experts in that field, as well as rigorous copyediting by someone familiar with the editorial style developed by trans communities to ensure that published language does not reproduce forms of rhetorical violence directly connected to forms of systemic and material harm.

In short, you can have any opinion you like, so long as it is ours. As to the 800 academics and writers who have signed this letter, at least on Twitter, I cannot help but recall Einstein’s reply to being told that a hundred Nazi scientists had written denouncing his “Jewish” physics: “If they were right, one would have been enough.”

To have consulted “specialists in feminist theory and gender and sexuality studies” would have been like reading a hundred copies of the same edition of *Pravda* to confirm the truth of what Leonid Brezhnev said in a speech. The authors of the letter probably believe that they are scholars just because

they have read, and added to, the immense pile of ill-tempered monomaniac polysyllabic drivel or verbigeration that now passes for scholarship among them, the production of which is now the key to advancement in the humanities departments of what were once institutions of higher learning. After all, no normal person would spend his time reading such stuff, and therefore to have done so must point at the very least to determination to succeed and a high level of tolerance not of people but of boredom, though not to the possession of a sense of humor. Their so-called scholarship is an extended *rite de passage* that leads to power in the academic world.

The authors of the letter write as if their field were one of established fact, and as if to deny their opinions were like denying that the world was round or that the blood circulates in the body. This is absurd; but those who differ from them are regarded not merely as benighted troglodytes, but as quasi-fascists.

They accuse the author of the book that they would like the OUP not to publish of having no intellectual merit for her work. I could not but help think of what King Lear said:

*Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash the whore? Strip thine own back;
Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her.*

That 800 intellectuals could be found to protest against the publication of the book illustrates an alarming development in our society; namely, that the greatest enemies of freedom of thought and expression are to be found among the very people one might have hoped were fiercest in defense of it. On the pretext of protecting eggshell sensitivities, they want to prevent discussion of contentious matters and enforce their own views as an unassailable orthodoxy. I suspect (though I cannot prove) that this is because, at some level of what one

must call their minds, they are only too aware that their views and careers are built on a foundation of shifting sands.

It is as well to remember that intellectual freedom is not the default position of human history, rather the reverse.

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