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Deadnames and Missing Chiralities: A Response to Steve Fuller’s “The Problem of Cishumanism”

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“Cisgender,” is a term first attributed to German sexologist Volkmar Sigusch and his coining of the term “cis-sexual” in the mid 1990’s (Sigusch 1995). In a 2015 interview (German language, [found here](#)) Sigusch explains his reasoning for the coinage, citing the Latin pair of prefixes “cis” (meaning “this side of”), and “trans” (meaning “on the other side of”), arguing that “if there is such a thing as transgender, there must also be cisgender, people who perceive and live their gender as being on this side of their physical sex, basically the so-called normals. For trans people, my invention in the nineties must have been a linguistic liberation blow, because the term has become accepted worldwide” (translation provided by my colleague Romy Rasper and DeepL.com). Transgender activists quickly pounced on the term (see Martine Rothblatt’s first book *The Apartheid of Sex* (1995), and its updated version *From Transgender to Transhuman* (2011)), as Steve Fuller (2022) rightly points out, to mark those who were not trans, in effect de-naturalizing identity politics from the always-already what we “are” (see: “born this way”) to a place where identity is fluid and changeable.

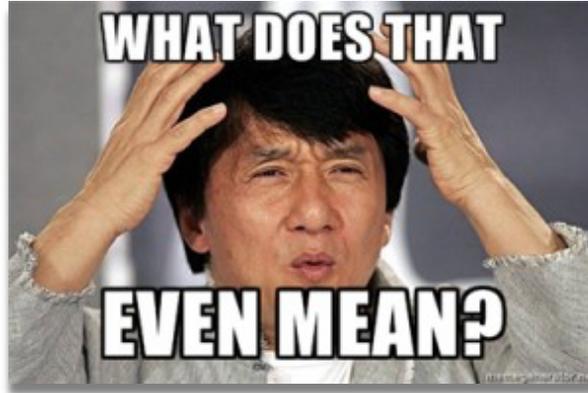
This use of “cis” and “trans” was not new in 1995. In fact, they have been commonly used in chemistry since the early 20th century to describe molecule chiralities. Chirality is a term coined by Lord Kelvin in 1894 to describe the relationship of certain geometrical figures. Kelvin wrote “I call any geometrical figure, or group of points, ‘chiral’, and say that it has chirality if its image in a plane mirror, ideally realized, cannot be brought to coincide with itself.” In much the same way that we have left and right hands that are chiral, molecules can have “left-” and “right-handed” chiralities (some isomers can have more than two chiralities, and these are generally denoted with E—Z notation rather than the simple bi-directional cis-trans chirality), being essentially the same, but mirror-images of each other.

Different chiralities of molecules can have vastly different effects from what is, essentially, the same organization of atoms. This first came into widespread recognition with Thalidomide, the anti-nausea drug for pregnant women developed in the 1950s then pulled in 1961 after it was linked to birth defects. One chirality of the drug was perfectly safe, and worked quite well. However, the other chirality was what made everything go wrong. The reason it was pulled and not just formulated in the cis chirality is because a person’s body can break down and re-form thalidomide, and will do so in the trans chirality, so there was no safe formulation of the drug (Thalidomide is still used to treat some cancers, chirality in this instance not being a factor in efficacy or safety).

The use of “cishuman” following from the transgender to the transhuman project is an interesting move (Fuller is not the first to propose it as Andrew Fiala coined the term in 2019 in his paper “A Defense of Cis-Humanism: Humanism for the Anthropocene”). I feel that Fuller’s examination is missing some vital information and political consideration that makes it problematic in several ways. This response is an attempt to reveal some of those problematics and push the discussion further. I will not formulate an argument about whether the term is a worthwhile label and political project. I have my doubts, but I will leave that determination to later writings. This response will focus on two major claims central to Fuller’s thesis—the political project of the cis label in transgender activism, and

the claim that transgender people are (classical) liberals—and the citational politics of the piece itself. Other critiques are possible, of course, but I will leave those to other authors.

1. What Does “Cis” Mean?



“Cis” is a term of marking, of labeling. Of, as Fuller puts it, “subverting the foundations of identity politics.” That subversion is not, as Fuller argues, one of possible ontological misrecognition, but rather one of normativity. Cis marks the standard as constructed, as chosen. It de-natures the molecule of gender expression and reveals other chiral naturalities. It functions in much the same way that the term “white” may in discussions of race. It marks the unmarked category against which trans (or racialized, Black, Indigenous, Hyphenated, etc. in race discussions) becomes the “other.” It “others” the “default.”

Another problem with cis as a marker of ontological misrecognition is that trans activists do not use the cis and trans term to delineate new ontological categories. They argue, instead, that “cis” and “trans” are *adjectives*, thus maintaining the ontological category of women as available for trans women (or men for trans men). TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) often use the term transwoman (no space) as a marker of ontological difference, thus keeping trans women *out* of the category of woman. Fuller, in his opening gambit, makes a category mistake (or perhaps simply an attribution error) by tying his own “cishuman” ontological category to trans activists’ goals of inclusion through the use of these adjectives. This mismatch troubles the entire political project he attempts.

Also, “cis,” while certainly able to be used pejoratively, is not, itself, a pejorative, nor a slur, as TERF activists claim. The same way that “white” can be *used* pejoratively, but is not *a* pejorative. The “cis is a slur” line of argument follows from the “TERF is a slur” argument put forth by TERFs once their political ideologies became more widely known and argued against. The term Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, and its acronym TERF, were self-appointed by those activists who had gender-essentialist views, and saw “transgenderism” as unnatural and dangerous to “real” women. TERF did become a pejoratively-used label, especially online by leftists and transgender-affirming academics and activists. This eventually led to the term having a rather negative connotation associated with it, even to those who may not know the ideology behind the term.

TERF ideology is based in biological essentialism hidden in a bad-faith claim towards “abolishing” gender. The abolishment that TERFs seek is one towards biosex (ignoring completely the actual complexities of biosex, and being mostly about chromosomes, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics and little else) being the marker of social order rather than any sort of constructed category that might be transgressed or moved between. For more on TERF ideology as well as the UK center of the academic movement, I suggest Pearce et. al’s *TERF Wars: An Introduction* (2020), or Luísa Souza’s 2019 *Medium* article “Understanding TERFs: Their History, Thought, and ‘Activism’.”

By position “cis” as a pejorative at the very start, Fuller (perhaps inadvertently) again takes up the TERF framing of the term. This is both antithetical to his argument that it reveals possible transformations of the human (because the TERF frame of cis argues instead for a naturalized stasis), and morally questionable (as the TERF political project is actively harmful to trans people generally, trans women especially, and cis women inadvertently but inevitably).

Now, “cis” may certainly *feel* like a pejorative to those so labeled, and it will do so for two main reasons. The first reason is the ramifications of marking an unmarked category. By marking “cis,” it no longer becomes the standard, its place at the top of the social hierarchy becomes destabilized. The power and privilege associated with being unmarked is revealed as contingent, unstable, and potentially even a location of hierarchical disadvantage should social mores change. Marking “cis” threatens those within that category with the possibility of being treated like they (we) treat “trans.” “Cis” feels like a pejorative because that’s often how cis folks use the term “trans.”

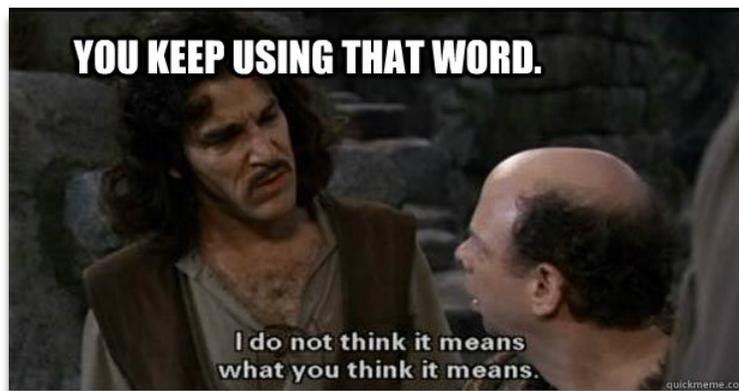
The second reason cis can feel like a slur or a pejorative was described perfectly by Imani Barbarin in a TikTok—https://www.tiktok.com/@crutches_and_spice/video/6984109262599490821—when she was asked why she uses the term “non-disabled.”

She says:

There’s a very short answer to this, and a very long answer to this. The short answer is because it pisses people off, but the long answer is the reason why. In 2019 I started a hashtag called #AbledsAreWeird. I got a lot of responses from nondisabled people saying “not all ableds, not all ableds, well maybe disabled people are weird.” Essentially when you study postcolonial literature and the communications of other-ism people who are always afforded their privilege are always afforded their individuality as well. Therefore, creating a label and then lumping them all together inherently pisses them off because they’re always supposed to be seen as individuals, and judged only on their individual merits, not them as a whole group. So when you lump them in together they get afraid that they’re going to be judged based on the merits of their entire group rather than themselves as an individual, which is never afforded people who are othered. And that’s why they say “not all [blank]” because they’re “individuals.”

The label of “cis,” works in this same way. It groups a set of people who are not often associated with each other. The label removes a sense of individuality. The combination of losing individuality, and being marked in relation to another group, particularly one of lower social standing, together make cis feel like a pejorative when it is simply a name given to a group of people. Essentially it feels pejorative to those it labels because it reveals, names, situates, and questions the morality of current social hierarchies—threatening those at the top of those hierarchies with social de-valuation—as well as grouping people together and erasing their individuality.

2. What Do We Mean by Liberal?



To me, one of the most baffling statements in Fuller’s piece is when he writes “it is worth observing that those who ‘go trans-’ are *not* normally Marxists or even Hegelians—but *liberals?*” (page 2, italics in the original). He uses as his evidence two trans women (the only two women (or trans people for that matter) mentioned in the piece, while simultaneously deadnaming them ... issues I’ll get to in the next section)—Dierdre McCloskey and Martine Rothblatt who are a successful economist and businesswoman respectively. Both of these women would absolutely define themselves as liberal, if not neoliberal or libertarian (the nuances of the difference between the three labels is unimportant to my point, but likely something that needs more attention within the transhumanist space). The problem is that neither woman is a good exemplar of the entirety of the transgender movement. Indeed, no two individuals ever could be.

Transgender communities are, as most groups are, quite heterogenous. You will get some, like Rothblatt and McCloskey who absolutely identify as liberals in the sense that Fuller describes. However, most trans folks (like most cis folks) who identify as liberals likely would do so in the colloquial “opposite of conservative” way. Most aren’t going to know what a “Hegelian” even is, and will likely have the kind of red-scare caricature of Marxism that dominates popular culture in the US (and likely the UK as well). If any political ideology achieves a plurality within trans communities, it is not liberalism, but *leftism*.

As a particularly marginalized group, transgender folk feel the weight of systems built for not-them. Liberalism, as the foundation of the individualist market-based valuation of the US, UK, Western Europe, and much of the rest of the world, is a particularly weighty one. Trans activists are often on the front lines of attempts to dismantle the very systems that

uphold liberalism. Why would they ascribe to a system that ostensibly supports their decision to determine their own identity, but then also leads to bathroom bills and employment discrimination?

Part of Fuller's mistake is ascribing the ideals of the beginnings of liberalism (and its association with radicalism) from the time of the French Revolution and Bentham's politics when describing utilitarianism (the preferred ethical framework of transhumanism), to the identity political contexts of the modern day. For sure, presents and futures are built of pasts (h/t William Gibson), and from whence liberalism came is certainly relevant, but Fuller ignores most of the changing contexts that have happened in the more than 200 years since the storming of the Bastille.



A second mistake is imagining that transgender communities and transhumanist communities are fighting similar battles: to free themselves from systems of naturalized categorization, and to be able to alter oneself at will without social repercussions. However, in so doing, Fuller ignores the different standpoints of transgender people and the average (neo)liberal/libertarian transhumanist. He imagines that the problem is one of legal and economic allowance of transition. A liberty/liberal problem that can be easily compared. Such a comparison becomes difficult, if not impossible, once actual transgender literature is seriously confronted. Even more so if the intersection of race (as Fuller hints towards, see next section) is also considered.

Transhumanists, generally, come from incredibly privileged and powerful social locations. Fuller himself is a white, cis man with a prestigious title at a prestigious university. Others, like Andy Clark, Julian Savulescu, Nick Bostrom, and Anders Samberg hold similar stations. Technologists more in the vein of Rothblatt include names like Ray Kurzweil, Peter Diamandis, and Peter Thiel, all of whom, again, occupy extremely privileged positions in society. Kurzweil is a lead designer for Alphabet (Google's parent company), Diamandis and Thiel both got rich off of the dot com boom, the latter even rising to the position of advisor to the former POTUS. Many other transhumanists, of course, have much more humble lives, including those in leadership positions at the Transhumanist Political Party (Gennady Stoylov III, their current president, works as an insurance adjuster, for instance). However,

the vast majority are male, and though demographic data on transhumanists is difficult to come by, it also seems to skew very white.

Trans communities do not enjoy the same demographic heterogeneity, nor the same kinds of economic and social locations of power. In fact, I would be hard pressed to name trans people (excepting perhaps, McCloskey and Rothblatt) in the same kinds of powerful positions as those top transhumanists enjoy. Though I do know several trans people in academia, none rise to the level of endowed chair, many of whom work in underfunded departments and in devalued disciplines. They tend toward [Area] Studies, which always seem to be first on the chopping block of universities looking to use austerity to “save money.”

In short, the comparison is fraught at best, and dishonest at worst. Transgender folks do not widely identify as liberal in the sense that Fuller suggests, and in fact may widely reject the label as liberalism contributes to their oppression.

3. Who Do We Include?



In 2017 Rebecca Tuvel published an article in the feminist journal *Hypatia* titled “In Defense of Transracialism.” In this article Tuvel argued that the same arguments that support transgender people being accepted as their chosen gender should also apply to people like Rachel Dolezal who claim to be a race other than that to which they were born. Tuvel and *Hypatia* both received significant criticism for the article, ultimately resulting in widespread resignations from *Hypatia*’s editors and board members. The main complaints brought against the piece were enumerated in an [open letter](#), signed by more than 800 people (it is not my intent to re-litigate this controversy, nor am I arguing for or against the validity of either Tuvel’s article, nor the critiques of it). Most relevant to this discussion are points one and four brought to bear against Tuvel and *Hypatia*:

1. [Tuvel] uses vocabulary and frameworks not recognized, accepted, or adopted by the conventions of the relevant subfields; for example, the author

uses the language of "transgenderism" and engages in deadnaming a trans woman;

4. [Tuvel] fails to seek out and sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color) in [her] discussion of "transracialism".

Fuller, similarly, attempts a genealogy of a term without ever engaging with scholars of that term, or scholars who are trans themselves. The only trans people he even mentions are in passing and in relation to his argument that to "go trans-" is liberal, deadnaming both in the process. Deadnaming is the act of referring to a transgender person by the name they were given at (or shortly after) birth rather than their chosen name. This is considered rude to the point of violence by many—if not most—in trans communities.

In fact, Rothblatt and McCluskey are the only women Fuller mentions at all in his piece (he cites or mentions no people of color. I should mention that my own citations for this piece tend problematically white as well), preferring to use the concepts of dead white European cisgender men for all of his rumination on the concept of trans. That Fuller deadnames both only serves to erase their womanhood, reifying their original masculinity as a/the reason that they are notable enough to be included in his piece. This reinforces, intentional or not, the misogynistic belief in the general superiority of men, and the transmisic belief that trans women are still men (see: the TERF discussion above).

Furthermore, there is an entire field already dedicated to unpacking this thing we call "trans:" Trans Studies. *Trans Studies Quarterly* has been regularly published since 2014. Trans scholars are well-known within and around STS and Philosophy. Paul Preciado extends and expands on Foucault to include trans issues (as Foucault seems to be a genesis of this line of thought, Preciado ought to be of particular interest). Eli Clare brings together trans studies and disability studies (relevant here as DS critiques of transhumanism are particularly incisive). Anna Lauren Hoffmann discusses data, futurity, and transness in her work. Katrina Roen discussed the discursive tensions in transgender politics back in 2001. Fuller could have even engaged with the ideas of Martine Rothblatt who has written several books on both transgender-ness and transhumanism (including one on the connection between the two). But instead, she gets relegated to a stand in for the entire trans community, and not as an intellectual interlocutor of her own merit (Fuller does engage with her work in other pieces). It is not my place to collect a syllabus of trans material, however. Fuller is a skilled scholar; I believe him up to the task of finding relevant literature. My point is that when speaking about certain identities—especially identities he does not share—Fuller ought to be speaking *with* them, explicitly. This is a matter of academic integrity.

Fuller also harkens to Tuvel's argument that transgender and transracial boundaries ought to be aligned within the same argument structure when he writes that

Thus, nowadays women who fight for recognition as women in a male-dominated society do not also fight for anyone to be recognized as a woman;

Blacks in a White-dominated society do not also fight for anyone to be recognized as Black; etc (2022, 4).

He then asks why there is not a solidarity with people who make it into restricted spaces, an answer well-trod within Black Studies, Disability Studies, and Transgender Studies. Again, he need only look.

Fuller attempts to reinvent several wheels in service of a project that, ironically, already has quite a bit of sympathy from the transgender community. The idea of hot-swappable body parts, and identity-switching on demand without any social stigma is a dream to many in transgender communities. Morphological Freedom is, after all, exactly what they ask for (I've written extensively about this in the final chapter of my Dissertation. A portion of the relevant chapter is forthcoming in an edited volume to be published later this year, for which the preprint is available here: <https://cyborgapologist.com/pre-print-publications/>). The challenges they face, however, are not ones of choosing between Marxism, Hegelianism, or Liberalism, but of dealing with discrimination, hate, and violence that can rise to the level of murder, suicide, and death.

When people write about trans folks in ways that ignore their actual lived experience, not referencing a single idea put forth by a trans person, it becomes yet another instance of speaking *for* a group rather than with it, in support of it, in allyship with it, or towards their actual liberation. It is the (perhaps cynical, perhaps inadvertent) colonization/appropriation of a political movement as a means of ascribing both the victimization of the group, and its (apparent) success in changing social mores, to a group comprised almost entirely of the most privileged people in the world. It uses “trans”-ness as a metaphor through which to filter past philosophical arguments. “Trans,” to trans people, is not a metaphor: it is their lives, material and vitally real. Using it in this way devalues that lived experience. That Fuller (dead)names two trans women in this project is not inclusion, but abject tokenism. By excluding the thoughts, writings, and academic production of any trans people, by excluding anything about or by trans people, Fuller makes no headway into any potentially generative ideas about the terms cis or trans, and certainly avoids anything close to a genealogy of the term. In fact, the absence of trans scholars makes his project epistemologically, academically, and morally bankrupt.

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