Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men (in five parts)
By Robert Jensen
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PART 1
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Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men / Part 1
By Robert Jensen
Julie Bindel Substack / April 4, 2026

When I was invited to write a chapter on men in feminism for a scholarly book, I told the editors that I would have to include discussion of my writing on the radical feminist critiques of pornography and transgender ideology, which are controversial subjects in academic feminism. They assured me that wouldn't be a problem, but I submitted a draft early because I've had editors reject such writing at the last minute. Their response did not surprise me: "The editorial team has met and decided the article does not fit with our mission for the book."
I'm grateful to Julie Bindel for offering to run the essay on her Substack in installments, starting with today's introduction to the challenges for men in feminism. The second part makes a case for radical feminism and analyzes masculinity-in-patriarchy. Part 3 deals with pornography, and Part 4 analyzes transgender Ideology. The final installment argues for feminism from men's self-interest and reflects on dilemmas for men in feminist projects.
Readers of this Substack will recognize some of these ideas from articles of mine that Julie has published over the past few years or from my books Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity (2007) and The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men (2017).

Members of dominant classes have uneasy standing in movements that challenge their class power and privilege. Can we contribute to intellectual debates and political change without replicating a dominance dynamic? Why should anyone trust us? Should we trust ourselves?

As a white man born in the United States who has worked in professional jobs during a period of economic expansion, I have considerable first-hand experience with this quandary. As a friend once told me, "Jensen, if you had been born good looking, you would have had it all." What guidelines should someone with my advantages follow?

During my time in feminist scholarship and activism, one of the commandments for men has been "accept the leadership of women," reminding us that we have no claim to authority and don't automatically know best. Like most platitudes, however, it's sketchy.

The obvious question: *Which women?* Working in scholarly or political arenas as a pro-feminist man means working with feminists and rejecting or ignoring most of the claims of anti-feminist and non-feminist women. But another equally obvious question: *Which feminists?* There has never been a single, unified approach to any intellectual/political movement, including feminism. Liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, cultural, psychoanalytic—the list of feminist theories goes on and on. I can't accept the leadership of all feminist women when they disagree among themselves. Making choices is inevitable, as others have pointed out.

Many men avoid those conflicts by describing themselves as "male allies" engaged in "allyship" on "male allyship journeys," terms that not only don't help navigate conflicting feminisms but sideline men's self-interest in embracing feminist principles as active participants with a stake in the struggle. Pro-feminist men, like all people, have mixed motives. (One of my favorite aphorisms is "I've never met a motive that wasn't mixed," though I haven't been able to track down its origins.) I have yet to meet a saint in academia or political organizing who acts with no concern for self-interest. We do things for complex reasons involving not only our sense of justice and also our psychological and social needs.

In this essay, I confront these tensions, rejecting the duck-and-cover strategy some men use. Men must balance the need for humility with the inevitability of making intellectual and political judgments, taking responsibility for how we analyze the sex/gender system and challenge patriarchy. We should explain why we follow the leadership of particular women, endorse particular analyses, and support particular policies to challenge institutionalized male dominance. If we avoid those decisions, we almost always by default "choose" the conventional wisdom in our social circles. I offer as examples the radical feminist critiques of pornography and transgender ideology, cases in which men too often step back to avoid conflict and end up endorsing (explicitly or implicitly by their silence) the dominant liberal/postmodern position. What should guide pro-feminist men in our intellectual and political decisions? To quote a friend, we must not only pursue justice but be in this struggle "to save our own lives."

I will begin with a summary of my career, explaining why I embrace radical feminist analyses and critique not just "toxic masculinity" but the culture's obsession with masculinity/femininity. I will apply those analyses to pornography and transgender ideology, concluding with an account of how arguments from justice and self-interest don't conflict.

Who am I?

I retired in 2018 as a full professor in the School of Journalism after 26 years at the University of Texas at Austin. I have written a dozen books (a few more if one defines "book" broadly) and lectured on every continent (except Antarctica), while getting paid to do something I loved (teaching). What are the secrets to my success? Mediocrity and dumb luck.

Dumb luck came in many ways, beyond white, male, and U.S. citizen. I was born in 1958, which meant my post-secondary education came when state universities were affordable and graduate assistantships were generous. When I finished my Ph.D., job openings were relatively plentiful. But one bit of dumb luck was distinctive: In the first month of my doctoral program, I met Jim Koplin, a retired psychology professor who was the volunteer office manager for Organizing Against Pornography in Minneapolis. He quickly became my closest friend, gave me insightful advice on navigating academic life until his death in 2012, and was my model for how men could work in feminist organizations with integrity. (Jim will pop up now and then in this chapter, but for anyone interested in more detail, see *Plain Radical: Living, Loving, and Learning to Leave the Planet Gracefully*.)

My mediocrity takes more explanation. When graduate students asked me for career advice, I said, "The secret to my success is that I'm mediocre, *and I know it*." I don't lack self-confidence but rather was validating students' experience with inflated faculty egos and reminding myself of my limits. The coin of the realm in universities is being a big thinker with original ideas. But most of us aren't big thinkers, and original ideas are rare. Rather than being satisfied with striving for competence, professors too often puff themselves up. Jim helped me resist this temptation. He saw that my intellectual background was inadequate, especially in math and science, and that I was unlikely to catch up on all fronts. Compassionately, as a friend, he helped me understand that while I didn't have the makings of an intellectual star, I wrote clearly and could contribute to intellectual life as an interpreter of other people's work. I think I got pretty good at identifying smart people who had innovative ideas and summarizing (and, in some cases, expanding on) those ideas for regular folks, whether undergraduates in my classes or the public.

I did enough scholarly publishing to get tenure in 1998 but after that wrote almost exclusively for general audiences. I never saw my fate as being tied to media/communication studies or its professional associations, or any academic discipline. Once tenured, I wasn't dependent on scholarly arbiters of what was fashionable theory and research.

That's the easy part. More difficult is explaining why radical feminism struck a chord in me. What made me so open to an argument that so many men rejected? I struggle with how to write about this, in part because I struggle to understand it and in part because it is emotionally intense. My forthcoming book, *This I Don't Believe: A Fulfilling Life without Meaning*, gives the best account I have come up with so far, and I'll condense that story here: As a boy, I was used in ways that so many girls and women get used. It takes a lot out of me to write that sentence but to avoid it would be dishonest. Not all boys have that experience, of course, and I am not suggesting that radical feminism is relevant only to those who have experienced abuse and violation. But I can't pretend it isn't part of my story.

A note about terminology. There's a longstanding debate about whether men should call themselves feminist or pro-feminist. If feminism is the project of women's liberation, can men be feminists? I once gave this a lot of thought, deciding to describe myself as a man who

worked in feminism and avoid labeling myself a feminist. These days, I am comfortable with either label but believe that because feminism is essential to men's well-being, we need to be feminists.

Next in Part 2: The case for radical feminism and against masculinity-in-patriarchy

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PART 2

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Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men / Part 2

By Robert Jensen

Julie Bindel Substack / April 12, 2026
This essay first appeared on Julie Bindel's Substack. Read the introduction to this series.

The case for radical feminism

I can't know what the term "radical feminism" means to readers today because that philosophy has been marginalized in most academic and political settings in the United States. But during my time in graduate school (1988-92), radical feminism was an important part of feminist conversations.

I have long joked that when I started studying feminism, I already knew a lot—feminists were ugly women who couldn't get dates. In other words, I was ignorant in the way many men are trained to be ignorant. The first concept I had to wrap my head around was patriarchy, the various incarnations of institutionalized male dominance in public and private spheres. In the late 1980s, feminists had to argue that despite the gains of the women's liberation movement, the world remained patriarchal. That's more obvious today in the United States, given the celebration of old-school patriarchal values by so many men in power. But patriarchy's fundamental claim—that males and females were created or evolved differently for different purposes, with men on top—never disappeared.

In the 1960s and '70s, second-wave feminists challenged patriarchal claims that men's domination and exploitation of women are natural and inevitable, and distinguished biological sex from social constructions of gender. Cultural ideas about gender emerge out of sex differences—if we were not a sexually dimorphic species it's hard to imagine the concepts of

masculinity and femininity emerging—but today's gender norms reflect the unequal distribution of power between men and women since patriarchy emerged a few thousand years ago. Because some in the transgender movement have rejected this feminist account of sex and gender, it's useful to restate some basics.

Sex differentiates between male and female based on the physiological characteristics associated with distinctive roles in reproduction and doesn't change because of social systems. Sex is biological and binary. Gender differentiates between masculine and feminine based on ideas about the meaning of male and female, claims that are neither uniform across societies nor static within any society. Gender is a social construction that reflects institutionalized male dominance.

Radical feminism challenges male dominance and rejects patriarchy's rigid, repressive, and reactionary sex/gender norms. Radical feminism analyzes the ways in which women are oppressed as a class and men as a class hold more power, and how those differences systematically disadvantage women. Sex/gender oppression plays out in different ways depending on social location because men's oppression of women is affected by other systems—racism, heterosexism, class privilege, and histories of colonial and postcolonial domination.

Many feminists would endorse that summary. Distinctively, radical feminism rejects social hierarchies across the board but understands patriarchy as the foundational system of domination and subordination, as the late Andrea Dworkin articulated in her first book in 1974:

> The commitment to ending male dominance as the fundamental psychological, political, and cultural reality of earth-lived life is the fundamental revolutionary commitment. It is a commitment to transformation of the self and transformation of the social reality on every level. (p. 17)

Radical feminists argue that a key site of men's oppression of women is sexuality. Radical feminists organize to end men's sexual violence and harassment but also reject the buying and selling of objectified female bodies in pornography, prostitution, and other sexual-exploitation industries. Radical feminists critique surrogacy, the business of renting women's wombs not only to infertile heterosexual couples and gay male couples, but now also to women who don't want to carry a fetus. Most controversially, radical feminists have critiqued transgender ideology.

I describe the dominant approach to feminism in academia and politics as liberal/postmodern, even given differences between liberal and postmodern theory. Liberal feminism's priority is challenging barriers to women's participation in public, such as business and politics. Postmodern feminism challenges the stability of the category "woman" and emphasizes how language constructs social categories. But liberal and postmodern feminists have one thing in common: Rejecting radical feminism. Most liberal and postmodern feminists reject the critiques of pornography and of trans ideology, sometimes arguing radicals shouldn't be considered part of feminism.

I have no standing to resolve these conflicts but encourage men to embrace the radical critique. Women are welcome to read my work, and I'm glad if it is helpful. But I have always written about feminism primarily for men.

Masculinity-in-patriarchy

Men routinely cause problems for women, the consequence of how men are socialized in patriarchy. But if we aren't intrinsically "bad to the bone," why are men so often "breaking bad"? Understanding masculinity today requires an analysis of masculinity-in-patriarchy.

Consider the children's game King of the Hill, in which the object is to capture the top of the hill and then repel challengers. Both boys and girls might play King of the Hill, but in my experience it was a boys' game. King of the Hill illustrates two characteristics of the dominant conception of masculinity: No one is safe, and everyone loses something.

King-of-the-Hill masculinity, which leads men to seek control over "their" women and find pleasure in that control, is dangerous for men as well. Because there can be only one person at the top, other men must be subordinated to the king, who must always worry about who is coming up that hill. The king can form alliances, but those allies can turn on him when they see an opening.

Men also play this game. A friend who once worked on Wall Street described coming to work as "walking into a knife fight when all the good spots along the wall were taken." Every day you faced the possibility of getting killed, figuratively, with no reliable protection. Patriarchal masculinity means endless competition and ever-present threat. Men don't always have to play, but no guy will be seen as normal if he challenges the rules too often.

There are no universal standards for masculinity that all men embrace everywhere, hence the term "masculinities." As in most social systems, there is variation and resistance. But this dominant conception of what it means to be a man—competition for control to avoid being subordinated—continues to dominate. We teach our boys that to be a man is to be tough, to be acquisitive and aggressive. We congratulate them when they hit hard on the football field. We honor them in parades when they return from killing enemies. We put them on magazine covers when they dominate business competitors and make billions. Sometimes, we elect them president.

Whatever the material benefits of masculinity, it's exhausting and unfulfilling. No one man created this system and many men wouldn't choose it if presented with better options. Patriarchy deforms men, narrowing our emotional range and limiting our capacity to experience the rich connections with women, children, and other men that require the vulnerability that "real men" so often run from. The Man Who Would Be King is the Man Who Is Broken and Alone. A normal guy is, eventually, a miserable guy, no matter how much wealth and power he accumulates.

Patriarchy constrains men but isn't equally dangerous for men and women. As feminists have pointed out, there's a big difference between the threats of harassment, rape, and exploitation that women face, and men being trained not to cry. But the short-term material gains that men get in patriarchy are not adequate compensation for what we men give up in the long haul—surrendering part of our humanity.

This doesn't mean all men have it easier than all women. Those other systems of dominance—white supremacy, heterosexism, predatory corporate capitalism, international inequality—mean that non-white men, gay men, poor and working-class men, and men in the Global South suffer in various ways. Sometimes everyday life is just hard for everyone. A radical feminist analysis doesn't ignore those problems but rather helps us understand the sources of suffering.

But I am wary of promoting "healthy masculinity" to challenge "toxic masculinity," a project too often detached from any feminism, let alone radical feminism. Healthy is better than toxic, but without recognizing that the problem is masculinity-in-patriarchy, men will be tempted to embrace kinder-but-gentler forms of male supremacy. For example, however effective the antiviolence campaigns "My Strength is Not for Hurting" and "Real Men Don't Rape" have been, both rely on patriarchal notions—men strong/women weak, and Real Man/Sissy Man. We don't have to abandon such campaigns, just be aware of their limitations. (See my book *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, pp. 145-147.)

Most of my writing has focused on how masculinity plays out in sexual relationships, straight or gay, bringing the King of the Hill into our most intimate spaces. This doesn't mean that every man in every sexual situation seeks dominance, but many men struggle with that training. The ways that men use cruel and degrading sexualized images of women in pornography is testimony to this reality.

Next in Part 3: Pornography

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PART 3
Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men / Part 3
By Robert Jensen

Julie Bindel Substack / April 19, 2026
This essay first appeared on Julie Bindel's Substack. Read the introduction to the series and Part 2.

Pornography
In the late 1970s and '80s, radical feminists were at the center of the discussion of pornography. Not all feminists embraced it, but no one could ignore the radical critique, articulated most powerfully by Andrea Dworkin.

Dworkin's 1979 book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, helped expand the liberal-versus-conservative debate about sexual freedom-versus-moral judgment to include a feminist analysis of harm to women, which led to a civil-rights ordinance first proposed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1983. That era's most common pornography included *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines, and movies such as "Deep Throat," "Behind the Green Door," and "The Devil in Miss Jones." All were sexually explicit, sometimes depicting coercion and force, but tame compared with the sexual degradation and violence readily available on today's internet. Even then, Dworkin saw that pornography was not just sex on the page and screen but sex presented in a domination/subordination dynamic, sex that eroticized power. Male domination/female subordination was the core dynamic, but any social hierarchy—race, ethnicity, class, nationality, disability—could be eroticized for the primarily male viewers.

When I arrived at the University of Texas at Austin in 1992, radical feminism was out of fashion in academic spaces influenced by postmodernism and political spaces dominated by liberalism. I launched my career drawing on an analytic framework that was going out of style. Luckily, at the 1993 International Communication Association conference in Washington, DC, I met Gail Dines. I presented "Pornography and Affirmative Conceptions of Freedom," examining pornography from the positive side of the negative/positive liberty debate. My paper was forgettable, but the session was memorable for me.

Because the title could have been read as a defense of pornography, Gail told me later that she had wanted to be at the session to challenge me but quickly realized we had reached similar conclusions about sexually explicit material. My presentation was mostly ignored, but there was a debate about another paper, with Gail offering vigorous critique. I remember thinking, "I'm glad she didn't object to my argument." After the session, I introduced myself, kicking off a collaboration and friendship that continues. For the remainder of the 1990s, Gail and I wrote about the critique of pornography, together and separately. I acquired a thick file of rejection letters from academic journal editors, who often offered no specific criticism of an article I submitted but simply dismissed the radical feminist analysis as discredited and irrelevant. With Gail's support, I eventually published all those articles and secured tenure. I continued researching and writing about pornography for another decade, stopping only when I was so emotionally exhausted that I feared for my mental health. Gail went on to found the nonprofit Culture Reframed to continue research and public education after she retired from teaching.

Here's my summary of a half century of radical feminist antipornography work: Andrea was right. The images that today anyone with a smartphone or computer can access illustrate the accuracy of that analysis. Pornography has become more intensely cruel and degrading to women and is the most openly racist mass media genre. Scenes of rough sex that pornographers once considered too risky are now unremarkable. Girls report that the boys they date want to replicate those scenes, including strangulation. Young women report abandoning hope of a male partner who doesn't use pornography. Women in relationships with men report a sense of betrayal when partners refuse to give up pornographic pleasures.

I doubt Dworkin could have predicted the intensity of the misogyny in today's pornography. Multiple penetrations, gang bangs, and ass-to-mouth are standard practices. Even pornography producers acknowledge these practices are degrading. When I asked producers in the early 2000s what trends to expect in the coming years, they couldn't predict. During the filming of the documentary "The Price of Pleasure," one producer responded rhetorically: "How many dicks can you stick in a girl at one time?" Producers said they didn't know how to devise sexual scenes more extreme than what was being filmed. That's what we call "mainstream pornography," presumed to be legal. The industry long denied it profited from filmed rape until a journalist documented the practice, and far more brutal material exists in the darker corners of the internet.

Dworkin also demanded that we not forget the women used in the production of pornography, and not just "porn stars" who promote the industry. I'm not mocking those women but simply pointing out they are not representative of an industry that, as one producer told me, "chews up and spits out women." Today, there is ample evidence of the psychological and physical harms to women used in the production of pornography.

In the 2000s, Gail and I published separate books on the pornography industry, which led to a research trip to Las Vegas for the annual Adult Entertainment Expo. It was my third time attending—first with that documentary film crew, then for research for my book *Getting Off*, and finally with Gail for her book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. One of our interviews was with a well-known pornography performer and her husband, who didn't deny that pornography industry's standard fare had grown more extreme but argued that was an expansion of sexual freedom. At the end of the conversation, Gail summed up the past two decades, telling the couple, "We were right, but you won." The radical feminist critique of pornography turned out to be a compelling account of sexually explicit media, but the pornography industry had grown bigger and more profitable. By "we," Gail meant the collective knowledge developed by scholars and activists, both formal research and the less-formal collection of the experiences of women used in pornography and women against whom pornography was used. Even more heart-breaking was that most feminists, especially in the academy, either ignored or rejected the radical critique.

This is the paradox of pornography. Two trends are uncontroversial. First, pornography has become more widely available and accepted. Second, the pornography industry has produced images that are more overtly cruel and degrading to women, as well as more overtly racist,

than ever. As pornography has become more normalized, the eroticized abuse has intensified. How can a media genre become both more mainstream and more misogynist and racist? Why would so many feminists, liberals, progressives, and leftists give pornography a pass? Media scholars, including many feminists, have long critiqued mainstream media (movies, television, news) for sexist and racist images. Why are the more overtly sexist and racist images in pornography not a problem? How did supporters of misogynistic images come to be labeled "sex positive," while radical feminist critics of eroticized male dominance are "sex negative"? Why does the dominant left position today view pornography as just a form of sexual expression and women's participation in pornography as one of many forms of "sex work."

The pornography industry's expansion is in part a routine business and technology story. The profit motive in capitalism drives pornographers, and VCRs, DVDs, computers, smartphones, and the internet have made production and distribution much easier. Independent operators in the industry's early days, often rumored to be mob-financed, gave way to studios making movies, gave way to shooting cheap gonzo scenes, gave way to OnlyFans, and is giving way to AI. But whatever the technology, pornography and the sexual-exploitation industries are fueled by men's demand for sexual access to women. Liberal-left/secular men call it "sexual freedom," by which they mean the freedom to pursue sexual pleasure without constraint from other men and without concern for the consequences for women. Conservative-right/religious men reject libertarian ideology, preferring "traditional family values" that give them control over "their" women at home, yet right-wing men are also patrons of the industries.

When I began speaking and writing, men asked me, "Why are radical feminists are so obsessed with pornography?" My response has been, "Why are men so obsessed with pornography, and why does the culture indulge men?" The simple answers, of course, are that pornography works—it provides quick and easy sexual stimulation without any emotional investment in another person—and patriarchal societies cater to men's demands.

But after self-reflection about my years of using pornography as a young man and conversations with many men, I think it's about more than just sexual access. Men use pornography for a sense of power over women—"porn girls" (the term pornographers use) don't challenge or reject men. That illusion of control helps men ignore our fears. Real men are not supposed to be afraid, of course, but I have never met a man who wasn't at some point in his life afraid of at least one thing: The fear that he is not "man enough." In patriarchy, men are trained not only to control women but to fear being controlled by other men if we aren't strong enough. Men routinely fear that we can't live up to what's expected of a "real man." Pornography provides temporary relief.

My focus has been on heterosexual pornography, but this is not solely about straight men. Gay men are targets but also complicit in patriarchy. Chris Kendall's book *Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination* is a good place to start. When I talk about gay men, I include myself. Most of my intimate relationships have been heterosexual, but some have been with men. That's also another story for another time, but many straight men have some gay

experiences and fear acknowledging that desire, another example of patriarchy's constraints on men.

Many feminist colleagues and political comrades disagreed with my analysis of pornography and the sexual-exploitation industries, which sometimes made for tense conversations. But I was never expelled from a group over those issues. That changed in 2014 when I began writing a critique of transgender ideology.

Next in Part 4: Transgender ideology

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PART 4
Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men / Part 4
By Robert Jensen
This essay first appeared on Julie Bindel's Substack. Read the introduction to the series and Parts 2 and 3.

Transgender ideology
Like the "sex wars" over prostitution and pornography, the transgender debate has put radical feminists in conflict with many liberal and postmodern feminists. After avoiding the subject for too long, I began writing in 2014, for two reasons. First, the expanding public conversation largely ignored or marginalized a critical feminist perspective, which was clear to me when a newsmagazine ran a cover story on transgenderism as "America's Next Civil Rights Frontier." Second, radical feminist friends asked why I stayed on the sidelines when so many women were being attacked for challenging trans ideology.

Because the issue was so emotionally charged, I tried to present a clear, step-by-step analysis in non-inflammatory language. But in that first 2014 essay, my conclusion was clearly stated:

> Transgenderism is a liberal, individualist, medicalized response to the problem of patriarchy's rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms. Radical feminism is a radical, structural, politicized response. On the surface, transgenderism may seem to be a more revolutionary approach, but radical feminism offers a deeper critique of the

domination/subordination dynamic at the heart of patriarchy and a more promising path to liberation.

A few weeks later, I met with a friend who was a university diversity coordinator and had participated in movements for racial, economic, and gender justice. A local activist bookstore, which I had long supported, had just denounced me in an email blast and announced it would no longer sell my books. Near the end of lunch, my friend hesitantly brought up the controversy, leaning forward to say, quietly, "I don't dare say this in public, but I agree with you."

It was reassuring to know she shared my analysis but disheartening that a left/liberal orthodoxy on trans issues silenced people. That was the first time, but certainly not the last, that colleagues and friends confided in me, privately, that they either disagreed with or couldn't understand the trans analysis.

A few months later, a comrade from a progressive group asked why I was challenging trans activists, whom he saw as political allies. I outlined what is now called the "gender critical" feminist argument, and he said he found little to disagree with. "To tell you the truth," he said, "I don't really understand a lot of what the trans movement is saying." I asked him if there were any other issues on which he couldn't understand a movement's arguments but still supported its policy proposals. That ended the conversation. Because so many people in local left organizations were denouncing me, I knew he wasn't going to ask trans activists for a clearer articulation of their arguments, let alone support me.

The reactions to my writing became increasingly more intense. At a few public talks, trans activists tried to shout me down. Several invitations I had received to speak were rescinded after organizers got complaints, even though those events weren't about the trans issue. Many colleagues kept their distance from me, some even refusing to respond to calls or emails about ongoing projects. Even when I was working behind the scenes, people withdrew from events out of concern for the backlash if members of their group knew I was involved.

Why the dogmatic responses? In a dozen articles and chapters in two books, I have made what I think are clear arguments. Instead of pointing out factual errors or unsound reasoning, critics accuse me of being bigoted or hateful. I'll summarize the arguments in those book chapters, and readers can judge whether I deserve condemnation.

In my 2017 book, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men*, the chapter "Transgenderism: Biology, Politics, Ecology" presented a question, a challenge, and a concern.

The Question: If the claim of people who identify as trans is that they were born into one biological sex category, such as male, but actually are female, what does that mean? Is it a claim that reproduction-based sex categories are an illusion? That one can have a female brain (whatever that means) in a body with male genitalia? That there is a non-material soul that can be of one sex but in the body of the other sex? I struggle to understand, and to date I am aware

of no coherent theory to explain it. Claims about sex being a "spectrum" or "multimodal" obfuscate that sex is a binary based on gamete size (sperm from males, eggs from females). The small percentage of people born intersex—now sometimes called differences (or disorders) of (or in) sexual development—raise issues different from the trans movement.

The Challenge: If the claim of people who identify as trans is that they were socialized into one gender category, such as man/masculinity, but feel constrained by the category or feel more comfortable in the norms of the other category, that's easy to understand. Like most everyone, I have negative experiences with the culture's rigid, repressive, and reactionary gender norms. But those norms are the product of patriarchy, requiring feminist critique to escape the gender trap. While some in the trans movement identify as feminists, others accept traditional gender norms and don't embrace a feminist critique of institutionalized male dominance.

The Concern: As one pro-trans writer put it after reviewing the dramatic interventions into the body in so-called sex-reassignment surgery, "It can seem and feel as if one is at war with one's body." Is that procedure, along with the use of hormones and drugs—including puberty blockers in children, which stop the body from producing sex hormones in order to interrupt physical development—consistent with the ethic of "first, do no harm"? With so little known about the etiology of transgenderism, is the surgical/chemical approach warranted?

I revisited this analysis in the chapter "Defining Sex/Gender: Beyond Trans Ideology," intended for my 2024 book, *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics*. The publisher had assured me that he wasn't worried about controversy, but right before the book went into production, he demanded that I cut it. As a compromise, we agreed the printed book would direct people to that chapter on my website, where I made it available for free. That chapter offered an argument similar to the 2017 book but framed a bit differently. I argued that trans activists pursue a politics that is intellectually incoherent, anti-feminist, and at odds with an ecological worldview.

Incoherent: When I have asked for more clarity on trans claims, advocates have told me that it doesn't matter whether I can make sense of their claims. I should accept the demands made by the movement, which has "the right to not be interrogated by the dominant structures of oppression," according to one of my Austin critics. That lack of clarity is sometimes even celebrated. The very act of naming and categorizing imposes limits that constrain the imagination, according to one prominent trans theorist, hence the use of an asterisk, "trans*" rather than "transgender." I will quote at length to make sure no one accuses me of distorting the message:

> I have selected the term "trans*" for this book precisely to open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. As we will see, the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people

> the authors of their own categorizations. As this book will show, trans* can be a name for expansive forms of difference, haptic [relating to the sense of touch] relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix. This terminology, trans*, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions. (pp. 4-5)

I don't quote this passage merely to poke fun at the abstruse language of postmodern academic writing. I can sort of figure out what Jack Halberstam is trying to say, though I can't see how any of it helps anyone understand anything. Should we not be concerned about an approach that "holds off the certainty of diagnosis" while accepting treatment that permanently changes a human body?

Antifeminist: With no clarity on what trans means, policy disagreements are inevitable. Most liberal and postmodern feminists argue that trans demands are feminist, or at least consistent with feminism. But many women reject, on safety and privacy grounds, the demands that men who identify as women—especially when that can be asserted merely by "self-identification"—be allowed access to female-only spaces and activities such as bathrooms, changing rooms, prisons, and sports. A trans movement that dismisses the legitimate concerns of women is antifeminist.

Imagine a high school boy who identifies as a girl and demands to shower with girls after gym class. Many girls may well find that invasive, for understandable reasons, especially since research indicates that some of those girls likely have been sexually abused, harassed, or exploited by boys and men. Whom do we care about if we treat the internal subjective experience of one boy who identifies as a girl as more important than the psychological consequences for girls? The boy who identifies as a girl could be accommodated in a separate facility (such as a teacher's shower, temporarily made available to a student) without imposing costs on the girls. To prioritize the interests of the boy is anti-feminist, as I understand feminism.

Ecological: There is a growing awareness of the threats to a long-term sustainable human presence on Earth because of human intervention into ecosystems, what I call an ecological worldview. Left/liberal dogma about so-called "gender-affirming care" ignores unresolved questions about the safety and efficacy of drugs, cross-sex hormones, and surgery. But beyond those concerns lies a more fundamental issue: Is interfering in the physiological development of a child through chemicals and hormones consistent with an ecological worldview? Is the surgical destruction of healthy tissue to deal with psychological distress, whether in children or adults, consistent with a commitment to living in harmony with the natural world?

In other writing, I have argued that modern societies should avoid "technological fundamentalism," the embrace of high-energy/high-technology "solutions" to all problems, including problems created by previous technologies. The trans movement embraces the

dominant industrial worldview—the refusal to accept limits on how we intervene in the larger living world, including limits on how we remake the body. In the quest to be "inclusive," too often we ignore an obvious question that should be asked of all cosmetic surgery: Is this a healthy way for society to address people's discomfort with their appearance or their distress about not conforming to social norms?

One important footnote: Radical feminists do not endorse every conservative policy on transgenderism. Many conservative critics mock people who identify as transgender and endorse overtly patriarchal gender norms. I empathize with people who experience gender dysphoria, especially when that distress is so severe that medical interventions seem the only route to relief. The radical feminist critique of transgender ideology doesn't ignore that suffering but instead provides an alternative route to deal with it. A growing number of mental-health professionals practice "therapy first for gender distressed youth." As I write this, there remains controversy in the medical profession about best practices, but in many countries gender-affirming care is being paused, and U.S. medical groups are beginning to explore other options. The radical feminist critique is not anti-trans, in the sense of unconcerned with the suffering of people who identify as trans.

Next in Part 5: Justice and self-interest

Robert Jensen is Emeritus Professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin. His most recent book, *This I Don't Believe: A Fulfilling Life without Meaning*, will be published by Blue Ear Books in 2026. Jensen is also the author of *It's Debatable: Talking Authentically about Tricky Topics* (Olive Branch Press, 2024). More information at https://robertwjensen.org/ or email rjensen@austin.utexas.edu.

END OF PART 4

PART 5
https://juliebindel.substack.com/p/justice-and-self-interest-by-robert
https://deaddogma.substack.com/p/not-just-an-ally-db5
Not just an ally: Radical feminism for men / Part 5
This essay first appeared on Julie Bindel's Substack. Read the introduction to the series and Parts 2, 3, and 4.

Justice and self-interest
My research and writing on pornography and transgenderism are rooted in a commitment to justice. I believe my work is consistent with principles of dignity, solidarity, and equality at the heart of feminism and other liberation movements. I recognize that not all feminists agree with the positions I take, but I continue for principled and self-interested reasons. When I began this work nearly four decades ago, I concluded that radical feminists offered the best account of the

sex/gender system and generated important political projects. I also believed that radical feminists charted a path that could help me become more fully human.

I never fit conventional masculinity norms. Growing up, I was short, skinny, and effeminate. My athletic skills ranged from barely competent to embarrassingly inept. I had no idea how to deal with sexuality. As a young adult, I figured out how to imitate some traditional masculine characteristics but was never very good at it, and my efforts to be "normal" were stunting my emotional development.

When I first embraced radical feminism, I assumed the critique of masculinity was relevant only to men like me, the ones who didn't measure up. Once I started talking to men, informally or in research interviews, I realized that almost every man has at some point worried that he isn't man enough. The good-looking high-school quarterback who drove the fast car and dated pretty girls—my youthful image of the guy who had it all—also struggled with the fear that he wasn't man enough, even if he couldn't articulate it.

Radical feminism gave me a language for letting go of patriarchal expectations. That hasn't always made day-to-day life easier. My first challenge was to understand why as a boy and young man I had used pornography compulsively. Other difficult questions followed. Why was I so afraid of my sexual attraction to men? Why did I keep stumbling over sexist attitudes I hadn't been aware of? I wanted to be the perfect feminist man, until I realized the struggle with patriarchal training never ends. Radical feminism didn't promise a happy ending but showed me that a life of struggle could be richer and more creative than striving to be normal. My relationships with men and women could be deeper and more meaningful. I could let go of some of my fear.

James Baldwin captured this feeling better than I can. Starting in essays in the early 1960s, Baldwin wrote not only for black people but offered white people help in understanding ourselves, and he refused to be constrained by narrow conceptions of masculinity. In those struggles, Baldwin identified a key problem:

> I think the inability to love is the central problem, because the inability masks a certain terror, and that terror is the terror of being touched. And, if you can't be touched, you can't be changed. And, if you can't be changed, you can't be alive.

Radical feminism was my entry into that struggle to be alive, to be as fully human as possible. From there, I grappled with the systems that produced white supremacy, economic inequality, global suffering, and ecological crises. There are many ways into these questions, and no intellectual framework or political movement has a monopoly on wisdom. But I will forever be grateful for finding radical feminism—for Andrea Dworkin's analysis and power with language, for Jim Koplin's wise counsel, for Gail Dines' steadfast friendship, for the many women who were patient when I was slow to understand.

Men are told that feminism is a threat, and in some sense that is accurate. Feminism is a threat to our ability to hang on to conventional notions of masculinity that may seem to protect us.

But once we let go of patriarchal pathology, we can more easily embrace love, touch, change, and life. We can see that feminism—especially the most radical feminism we are trained to fear the most—is not a threat but a great gift to men.

Conclusion: Shut up and speak up

We are living through another "crisis of masculinity," which periodically appear when social movements threaten change. The conservative case for a benevolent sexism that has long dominated the right now contends with the hostile sexism of the manosphere. Liberals concerned with the problems of boys and men reject a radical feminist analysis, or often any feminist analysis. Instead of looking to feminism, men too often blame women and feminism, explicitly or implicitly. I continue to argue there is no progressive path forward for men without feminism.

I have highlighted ways that adopting a radical feminist perspective has put me in conflict with not only political adversaries but also with friends and colleagues, but I'm not asking anyone to feel sorry for me. I don't feel sorry for myself. I lost friends but not my job, and I never felt at risk of physical attack. I know that radical feminist women who have offered similar critiques, going back to the late 1970s, face more harassment and more serious threats. I didn't enjoy being a target, but I knew it came with the territory.

In the debates over the sexual-exploitation industries and ideology of the transgender movement, I have met pro-feminist men who refuse to engage the issues, often claiming they have no right to dictate a position for women. I agree that our goal as men in feminist intellectual and political spaces is not to dictate, but I reject the duck-and-cover approach to contentious issues. Not every individual has to be actively involved in every debate, of course, but when the wider culture is riven by conflicts, we have an obligation not to avert our eyes.

Pro-feminist men must choose which feminist analyses to incorporate in their work. I have argued that to make those choices responsibly, we should realize that we have a personal stake in feminism. As we work for justice we also advance our own self-interest, defined not narrowly as patriarchal privilege but broadly as the quest to be fully human. That's why I understand myself as not just an ally to women but as an active participant in feminism.

People—including me and every other pro-feminist man—routinely fail to live up to the principles we espouse and standards we set. But I am comfortable with the intellectual choices I have made, though I remind myself now and then to rethink basic assumptions. Still, as confident as I might be, I am always uncertain about when to speak.

Through feminism, I learned that I should move out of the center and not assume that everyone is waiting for my insights. But if we want to help build feminist movements, we need more men to become involved, to support women and challenge other men. Women can manage without us, but liberation movements can be more effective with support from people in positions of unearned power and privilege. And to build that support, we have to tell our stories about why we embrace feminism, which is more effective than lecturing other men. We

can tell those stories in all-male spaces, but often our voices are useful to back up women in mixed settings.

So, pro-feminist men should *shut up* and follow women but also *speak up* to connect with men and support women. Take yourself out of the center, but sometimes ask others to focus on your message. When to step back, and when to step up? It's not always obvious, and it's always tempting to justify decisions that coincide with what we want to do. If we are fearful of speaking in a situation, we might be tempted to say, "This is when I should step back and let women speak." If we feel like mouthing off, we might be tempted to say, "I have a responsibility to speak now."

When I first started working in feminism, I was quick to step back and let women speak. As I became more comfortable speaking in public, I was more willing to assert myself. Since my retirement, I no longer seek public forums. I could provide reasons for those decisions, but I am never sure about the balance between sound reasoning and self-absorbed rationalizations. We all have the capacity to argue convincingly that the action we want to take is the right thing to do.

Shut up or speak up? I don't always know, but I am going to give Andrea Dworkin the last word, since it was her words that first inspired me.

"I Want a Twenty-Four-Hour Truce During Which There Is No Rape" began as a speech to a pro-feminist men's group in 1983 that answered the common question feminists face: "What do women want from men?" Just give us one day of rest, she said, "one day in which no new bodies are piled up, one day in which no new agony is added to the old." That will not happen until men take seriously feminism, which is also the vehicle for saving ourselves. Dworkin asked men to embrace feminism for women's sake but also because feminism is men's only hope of escaping the pathology of patriarchal masculinity. She challenged men to renounce our sexual prerogatives, let go of our fears, and help women and ourselves:

> I came here today because I don't believe that rape is inevitable or natural. If I did, I would have no reason to be here. If I did, my political practice would be different than it is. Have you ever wondered why we are not just in armed combat against you? It's not because there's a shortage of kitchen knives in this country. It is because we believe in your humanity, against all the evidence.

Next are the words of Dworkin that I have quoted most often. When I first read them, I felt their power in my body. Every time I re-read them, I feel that same power.

> We do not want to do the work of helping you to believe in your humanity. We cannot do it anymore. We have always tried. We have been repaid with systematic exploitation and systematic abuse. You are going to have to do this yourselves from now on and you know it. (pp. 169-170)

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