

ON THE BATHROOM QUESTION

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The public restroom is a vital battleground in the mainstream ‘culture war’ surrounding transsexuals. The rhetoric of the anti-trans chauvinists fabricate predatory trans bogeymen (and in particular, bogey-women) and unfounded hypotheticals to scare cis women into siding against trans women and to incentivize violent hate crimes by cis men. But what’s all this about? By all accounts, trans people are much more likely to be the victims than perpetrators of violence, and analyses have repeatedly shown no link between gender-inclusive bathroom policies (which have been in place for decades) and bathroom-centric violence, so why is this still a contentious issue? Why is this debate getting *worse*?

There are several major factors which account for the popularization and longevity of the bathroom debate. Firstly, it is one of a handful of issues in which the fight for trans rights can be conceived as having an impact on cis people — it centers the concerns of the cis majority in a way that suggests that there is an antagonistic contradiction between them and us. Furthermore, the ‘predatory queer’ trope is much older and was repeatedly used against gay men and lesbians to justify their exclusion too (both in bathrooms and elsewhere). As such, segments of the population are already primed and vulnerable to these sorts of fear mongering narratives which exploit their ignorance. Secondly, the emphasis on bathrooms and sports in the bourgeois press serves to delegitimize the trans struggle by presenting and emphasizing only the most mundane elements of it; they seek to portray us as needy, petty, and privileged people fighting for seemingly trivial things. The point is to sow division, to deter solidarity between would-be allies and comrades. In the words of Leslie Feinberg, “A tiny, parasitic class can’t live in luxury off the wealth of a vast, laboring class without keeping the majority divided and pitted against each other. That is where the necessity for bigotry began.” To what end? What is it they fear? Bluntly, they would sooner incentivize our dehumanization than to adapt infrastructure — *it’s simply the cheapest option!*

The most equitable solution to this manufactured crisis is quite obvious: rather than continue to build communal restrooms in which toilets are separated by flimsy, reconfigurable stalls, instead build a series of self-contained and fully enclosed single-stall restrooms. While fears surrounding integration are unfounded from the perspective of the cis majority, it is quite dangerous for the trans minority whose presence in gendered spaces puts them at risk. So while some may claim this compromise cedes too much to fear mongering, we think this position is

best suited to keep our community safe while doing the most to incentivize solidarity from cis society. More specifically, it turns a demand of the general public into a demand of our ruling class: although it is a solution that would certainly benefit all citizens and not just the queer minority, such a solution is routinely rejected for no reason other than *expense*. Understand that our ruling class would sooner condemn us all to hell than spend even an extra nickel installing new facilities: *that*, in short, is what “the bathroom debate” is really about!

Understanding all this, it should be noted that the demand to build trans-exclusive bathrooms, sometimes presented as an alternative to integration, is in fact proposed in bad-faith. Those arguing for segregation already know that this proposal will be rejected, and so the time has come to call their bluff! If we agree to “separate but equal” facilities, one of two outcomes will be realized: in the first case, there will be a backpedal and their intentions are laid bare; in the second case, this demand will be realized at the risk of inflaming the public by allusions to racial segregation and the wastefulness of building bathrooms for the exclusive use of 1% (give or take) of the population. Though their existence would paint a target on the back of whoever enters, such separate-but-equal facilities may even be the safest bet under current circumstances — especially for those of us who can’t easily pass as cis one way or the other.

In any case, power concedes nothing without a demand, so how can we fight effectively for our right to use the bathroom knowing that our ideal solution will be costly? We shall have to make the absence of exclusively gender-neutral single stalls more costly than their production. Such disruptive protest will require our cis comrades and allies to cooperate. For instance, a sort of ‘occupy the restroom’ movement could be started in which people perform sit-ins for single-sexed, communal restrooms. In more serious cases, perhaps after prior participants have been arrested or where there are too few allies to do it effectively, repeated destruction of toilets could fulfill a similar purpose — though backlash will no doubt be greater for a strategy of vandalism. Thus, this second strategy will probably be more effective if the first strategy is employed and the demands for trans-exclusive bathrooms are recalled; otherwise, as a first recourse, it may prove to be too antagonistic to a public who, needing to use the bathrooms, will be caught in the crossfire.