



Transgender

by Susan Stryker

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The term *transgender* dates from the 1980s. Its coinage is usually attributed to Virginia Prince, the Southern Californian advocate for heterosexual male transvestites, who in the 1960s wrote such pioneering self-help books as *The Transvestite and His Wife* and *How To Be a Woman though Male*.

Changing Definitions

The term initially referred to individuals, like Prince, who lived full-time in a social role not typically associated with their natal sex, but who did not resort to genital surgery as a means of supporting their gender presentation. The logic of the term is that, while transvestites episodically change their clothes and transsexuals permanently change their genitals, transgenders make a sustained change of their social gender through non-surgical means.

The term took on a different set of meanings following the publication of Leslie Feinberg's 1992 pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, the ideas in which were later expanded into the books *Transgender Warriors* (1997) and *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1999).

In Feinberg's usage, *transgender* became an umbrella term used to represent a political alliance between all gender-variant people who do not conform to social norms for typical men and women, and who suffer political oppression as a result.

As such, the term encompasses not only transgenders in the sense attributed to Prince, but also transvestites and transsexuals (who may be either female-to-male or male-to-female), androgynes, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, drag queens, people who would prefer to answer to new pronouns or to none at all, non-stereotypical heterosexual men and women, intersex individuals, and members of non-Western European indigenous cultures who claim such identities as the Native American berdache or two-spirit status, Brazilian *travesti*, Indian *hijras*, Polynesian *mahu*, Omani *xanith*, African "female husbands," and Balkan "sworn virgins."

Transgender Liberation

Feinberg, a Marxist, asserts the historical thesis that gender variance is an intrinsic part of human culture that was often honored and revered in pre-capitalist societies, but which has been suppressed within capitalism. Transgender liberation requires the overthrow of capitalism, just as any truly revolutionary social change must address the question of transgender liberation.

While Feinberg's explicitly Marxist analysis of transgender phenomena has not been widely embraced, her/his redeployment of the term *transgender* and its linkage to a progressive social justice agenda has proven immensely influential. Within a few months of the publication of *Transgender Liberation* in 1992, a San Francisco activist group calling itself Transgender Nation had formed as a special interest group within Queer Nation, and became the first organized expression of a newly militant political sensibility associated

with the term *transgender*.

Contested Meanings

Throughout the 1990s, a complex identity (and post-identity) politics grew up around *transgender*. For some, it has represented a powerful intellectual construct that could serve as a foundation for analyzing and representing the entire spectrum of human diversity across time and culture, while others have perceived it as a self-applied label representing only small segments of the wider gender-variant population.

Some transsexuals have seen in the term a rejection of genital surgery, while others have seen rejection of the term *transgender* to signify a conservative or apolitical sensibility. The term is often thought to represent a post-modern epistemological framework that posits a break between the "signifier" of gender and the "sign" or "referent" of bodily sex, and it is rejected or embraced on that basis.

Within Euro-American contexts, *transgender* has sometimes been seen as a term originating in elite, white, academic circles, and at other times as the basis of a progressive and inclusive gender rights movement. Outside of the United States and Europe, it has often been perceived as a non-indigenous term applied in a colonialist fashion to local gender cultures; at other times, it has been seen as a vehicle for forging alliances among divergent groups suffering from specific forms of gender oppression.

The primary divisions cluster around whether the universalizing potential of the term obscures meaningful differences between various specific forms and locations of gender atypicality, or whether the minoritizing potential of the term disables meaningful action and analysis rooted in a more systemic critique of social structures.

Established Term

More remarkable than the diversity of opinions about the meaning and political consequences of the term *transgender* is the astonishing speed with which it became an established, if contested, term. As anthropologist David Valentine has demonstrated, *transgender* had become a well-established term and concept in the popular media, glbtq community usage, academic publications, and social science/public health grant applications and funding decisions by 1995.

One consequence of the deployment of this term is that it tends to construct sexual identity categories (like homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual) as gender-normative, and to segregate gender non-conformity solely within the newly created minority classification of "transgender." This conceptual move allows "transgender" to be treated like a discrete identity category--setting in motion all the struggles over inclusion and exclusion--rather than perceived, like race or class, as a phenomenon that cuts across existing sexual identity categories.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) these controversies and complexities, a great deal of political, cultural, and intellectual work has been carried out under the transgender rubric since the early 1990s. The activist community mobilized through the term *transgender* has won human and civil rights protection for various forms of gender atypicality at various governmental levels. In the United States, this advance has tended to be at the municipal and, more rarely, the state level. Elsewhere, particularly within the European Union, the protections have been at the national, or even international level.

There has been a heightened level of interest in transgender issues in mass media (such as Kimberly Peirce's Academy Award-winning film representation of the Brandon Teena murder, *Boys Don't Cry* [2000]), and a concomitant rise in transgender visibility. Many gay and lesbian organizations have begun to engage with transgender issues in a substantive manner and have attempted to create a broader glbtq community. Transgender studies has also begun to emerge as a recognized academic specialization, with its own

professional literature, peer-reviewed publications, and conferences.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the recent and rapid development of *transgender* is the role the term has played in giving voice to a wide range of people whose experiences and understandings of gender, embodiment, and sexuality previously had not entered into broader discussions and decision-making processes. The emergence of these new speaking positions has already enriched an ongoing cultural conversation about gender and diversity.

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