

Is There a Price for Political Activism?

The transgender and transsexual community tends to fractionate along lines of opinions about political activism: is it a good thing, or a bad thing? Not surprisingly, some of those most opposed tend to characterize activists as ego-driven, sensationalizing dunderheads and even to claim that activists' efforts have set us back rather than moving us forward. Equally unsurprising, some activists show little understanding of or concern for those who wish to keep their identities secret.

The issue tends to be painted in black-and-white terms, but of course, it isn't so simple in real life. It's incontrovertible that transgenders and transsexual people have experienced a quantum leap in acceptability which was coincident with the rise of transactivism — but it's equally incontrovertible that activists have pissed a large number of people off. It is true that greater visibility in the media makes people more sophisticated at "clocking" even well-passing transpeople by their physical characteristics, but it's also true that most of us get read on occasion, and that media visibility has made it less dangerous for us when we do get clocked.

In the early '50s and '60s, few people permanently crossed the gender line, and only those who were passable were able to do so without receiving unwanted attention from the media and the local bigots. In this postmodern age, it has become relatively easy to gain access to the medical technologies which change appearance, and tens of thousands of people all over the world have undergone sex reassignment. In fact, the actual phrase — sex reassignment — does not adequately describe the wide range of options for people

who transgress gender in the '90s. A consumer sensibility has arisen. Transpeople are picking and choosing body parts and medical procedures much as they would choose an extended cab, heavy-duty bumpers, and air conditioning for a new pickup truck. This one crosslives full-time, but without surgery; this one has had SRS, but still lives in the originally assigned gender; this one has had breast implants but has not otherwise modified her body; this one wears dresses but doesn't even shave the body; this one is so butch everyone thinks she is male, but she identifies as a woman; this one blends male and female characteristics as if from a palate, achieving a deliberately androgynous appearance. Those who totally disappear into their new gender roles are outnumbered by those who maintain ties to their old lives, and yet total disappearance is still a valid option. In fact, every choice one can make has its benefits and disadvantages, and that includes both remaining in the original gender and disappearing into the woodwork after transition with the intention of never being seen again.

So in this diverse group, who stands to gain from political activism? Who stands to lose?

The voices most frequently raised against political action come from those who have chosen to assimilate, or who have hopes of one day doing so. They fear, and with some justification, that backlash against the transgender political movement will result in people becoming less tolerant rather than more, and that this will not bode well for them if they are discovered. Of course, a few decades ago, before there were organizations dedicated to providing education about transsexualism, before the television talk shows, before the protests, they would have faced the danger of being arrested and/or named in the media if they were revealed;

nowadays, there is little risk of widespread public exposure if they are found out. So my questions to them are: Why stop now? Do you think there has been *just* enough education about transsexual and transgender issues, and any more would be harmful? Or do you believe things were better in the '50s and '60s, when you would have made national headlines if you had been discovered?

But I have questions for the activists, as well. This spring, Transexual Menace demonstrated outside the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, demanding that Gender Identity Disorder be removed from the DSM-IV. Phyllis Frye has had some success in having born-male persons who have not had SRS declared legally female. So my questions are: Is the benefit of removing GID from the DSM worth the suffering it will cause those who might otherwise have had part or all of the costs of transition paid by insurance? Is it moral to negatively impact insurance coverage of your brothers and sisters? Will achieving legal status of persons with penises as women deligitimize the female status of those who have had genital surgery? Is there a price for political activism? And if so, are you willing to achieve your political goals on the backs of other transpeople?

I'm sure questions such as this were raised by Blacks and by gay men and lesbians during the early days of the civil rights and gay rights movements. Ultimately, as the *zeitgeist* changed as the results of those movements, the actions of even the most radical had a beneficial effect on even the most conservative. I believe the same thing will happen as the result of transactivism—has already happened, has caused a sea change in the way we are perceived and treated in American society. But there are no sure things in life. -AN