

## eIPO 2020, Topic 1

“If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls, and it would be a mistake not to recognize this. This is important social knowledge. But at the same time it is tempting to say that the cute/dork dichotomy is an illusion. It is socially and morally problematic and because it is reified through a pattern of belief and expectation, it could be undermined by a refusing to have beliefs in its terms. More generally, in cases such as this we seem to be able to generate a contradiction: it is true that p so you should believe p; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p.”

Sally Haslanger, “‘But mom, crop-tops are cute!’ Social knowledge, social structure and ideology critique’. In: *Philosophical Issues* 17, 2007, p. 73.

The beliefs and social realities that make up our society is a topic that has been widely explored within our society. From Foucault's work on instruments of control and their implications in regards to a wider society to Butler's work on what makes us the gender that we are, this topic is one ripe for analysis and discussion. The thesis above is in regards to certain social realities, namely those that we believe and view the lens of society with and over time, become reified and end up being expectations or societal truths. Sociologists have dubbed such phenomena under the Tinkerbell effect, defined as things where the more we believe in it, the more true it becomes, most famously the belief in the power of fiat currency.

To analyse the thesis above, we must first look at the example that Haslanger put out, namely, the cute/dork dichotomy. The problem with the usage of this as an example is that this dichotomy mostly presents itself in a high school situation, a far cry from the usual topics that scholars, even Haslanger herself, usually discuss and analyse. However, this serves us as a vantage point from which we can gain some insight into the view of radical movements that seek to undermine these reified societal norms, especially those that have to do with identities that have to do with the self, most notably in the contemporary era of racial activism and trans activism because of how it is not a very charged topic which carries with it massive implications on society.

The cute/dork dichotomy is a series or a set of expectations within a group of people, usually high school students, in regards to how they may act. While the definitions of what is cute or dorky may and have changed throughout the times, from the lewd highschooler aesthetic with short skirts and crop tops popular in the 1990s with people such as Britney Spears to the lewd e-girl aesthetic popular today with ahegao faces and hoodies and short skirts by platforms such as TikTok and people such as pokimane [sic] and Belle Delphine, there remain this dichotomy; namely that there are cute people, who are popular and loved for following certain social rules and fashions, and there are dorky people, who fall out of these popular circles and are ultimately shunned from this society as they fail to maintain social norms. These groups of people however, in their isolation may begin to bond together over their shared experiences of being alone and shunned and may even form, as cliché as it is in high school-related fiction, the unpopular kids table. And thus you have the cliché highschool

cafeteria, with the popular kids sitting within themselves, shunning out the dorky kids who sit among themselves within a “rejects club”.

If you are familiar with the activist movements over the past 50 years, you will have seen the similarities between the example given earlier and the dynamics that make up the bulk of the activist movements, namely the black/white dichotomy, the male/female dichotomy and the cis/trans dichotomy, which, like the cute/dorky dichotomy earlier (albeit to a much lesser extent), can be characterised as an oppressed/oppressor dynamic. With this framework in mind, we can therefore analyse the thesis above as stating that while it is true that you should believe such oppressor/oppressed dichotomies, but believing them makes them true and it would be better if they weren't true, and you shouldn't believe them. With this statement in mind, we can now present argumentation. In this essay, I will argue why I believe in Haslanger's thesis, potential counter arguments and counters to those counter arguments.

The communities of peoples of colour, from the Hispanics to the Blacks have had a storied history in terms of how they came to overcome the oppression of a society that regarded them as less than human. While it is widely believed the peaceful racial activism of figures such as MLK Jr. are the cause of the eventual success of the Civil Rights movement, stating so would neglect to display the more radical wings of the Civil Rights movement and their role in its success, and exemplified by figures such as Malcom X and the Black Panthers who provided community assistance to the downtrodden, whether black or white. How this movement came to succeed is a topic that has been analysed widely, but we can view it from a perspective of eventually overcoming the oppressor/oppressed dynamic, following the seminal work of scholars such as Franz Fanon, who wrote extensively about how this affected the mentality of the colonised in regards to themselves.

The idea of the black people being less than human and inherently built for slavery or is inherently inferior to the white man is a dynamic that has persisted throughout history as a fact of life, as something that has been deeply internalised in the American psyche as something inherently natural. While this idea was developed beginning around the 16th century in order to justify slavery in the eyes of the Spaniards under the Bible that regarded all men as equal regardless of race, this idea has been seen as universal and even effects how we view the past and of the Africans who are seen as a backwards race due to inherent genetic and racial factors.

This idea had been built up for generations, for hundreds of years, as something natural through which to see the society, with the white oppressors and the black oppressed. This idea of the mentality and culture of the oppressors being seen a good and better than the ideas and cultures of the oppressed is an idea that has been widely written about by postcolonial scholar Franz Fanon, who wrote about the internalisation by the Black people of the world that in order to move up in the societal hierarchy, one must “act white” and adopt the customs and the language of the oppressors, and shun those who refuse to do so and how that affected the oppressed peoples of the world. This idea had even been legally put in place and reified by the French colonisers in Africa, with there being a special class of the people in French Africa who spoke French and adopted Christianity and French culture. It

even effected things as fundamental as the nature of work, with sociologist Al-Attas in his seminal work, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* who saw that his race, the Malays, alongside other races such as the Javanese and the Philipinos had been characterised as lazy due to their nature of not working to the western-industrial model to the clock but rather through a set amount of work done each day, alongside the destruction of the craftsmen of their races in order to enforce the trade monopolies of the colonisers, and how even in the modern era the Malays internalised this idea of the Lazy Native and how it should be overcome following the western model of industrial work (it was written as a response to Mahathir's work, *The Malay Dilemma*, who is a popular political figure and former prime minister who wrote about the inherent nature of the Malays as lazy due to among other factors, incestuousness).

How this mentality was overcome, even in societies where it was extremely entrenched was by the means of radical activism and a total disbelief in the idea that this hierarchical idea of the black/white dichotomy even existed, and a sustained passion against it by any means necessary, by peace or by force. Why we view activism in this light brings us down to analyse what movements ended up being successful and what did not, and the fundamental nature of activism in itself.

In the pre-Stonewall era, there were many ideas of how to approach the idea of the eventual emancipation and the acquiring of rights within the gay and wider queer community. One idea was homonationalism, in which the gay people were given their own ethnostate in order to separate themselves from the society that oppressed them to form their own nation-state-community where they could rule. This failed because forming a nation-state requires international cooperation and ultimately an appeal to the interests of the national powers that be for the sake of their own interests and gains (see: the Yugoslavian balkanisation and how NATO and Russia had their own interests to gain by its breakup) and ultimately there was no powerful enough force to forcibly separate themselves from the pre-existing nations of the world. Another idea in place was gay assimilationism, in which that the gay people would ultimately try to assimilate themselves within society, while still homosexual but ultimately the same as any other heterosexual person. This failed because, as many activists of the past such as bell hooks puts it, "It is impossible to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools", meaning that the dismantling of the wider ideas of the oppressors by means of being part or acting within the framework of the oppressed, because the hegemony of the oppressed fundamentally prevents the oppressed from rising up in any meaningful way against it, because if not then it would have already collapsed already from its internal framework allowing its own destruction, and the hegemonic framework itself preventing us from thinking outside itself, as exemplified by Mark Fisher's work *Capitalist Realism* (and the previous ideas of thinkers such as Gramsci and the Frankfurt School), who wrote about how in this current neoliberal society, it became effectively impossible to imagine a future without capitalism and how the future as an idea did not change much in the recent years or "it would be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" as he put it. Therefore with the boiling up of anger that came from the queer community as a whole, it would be inevitable that a seminal event would come along and cause the queer people to rise against their oppressors, and on June 25, 1969, a sudden raid on the Stonewall Inn and a brick thrown by a trans woman would be

the spark to the militant queer movement that would eventually win rights for their emancipation.

This is what is meant by radical activism, with the word radical coming from the Latin term *radix* meaning roots. The root cause, the fundamental belief of the White man oppressing the Black man due to their inherent natures was to be completely dismantled and destroyed. And radical activism has been shown to work, with many civil rights movements gaining their start with radical methods that sought to destroy the structured that reified this belief, from the Blacks with the Black Panthers to the LGBT+ or Queer community with the Stonewall riots. **The argument in favour of this thesis is one of historical precedent, with the oppressed fighting back against the oppressor by means of undermining the mentalities that kept them in place as the oppressed and the dismantling of the oppressor/oppressed hierarchy in place, and that it is impossible to fight the oppressors within their own framework as the framework itself prevents us from thinking of fighting against it through the mechanisms of cultural hegemony, and the only possibility of overcoming these dichotomies is by radical disbelief and opposition to them.**

A counter argument you may posit against it is that this argument is circular, the belief that the dichotomy can be destroyed by disbelief in it, because the dichotomy can be destroyed by disbelief in it. The dichotomies are still there, one may argue despite the massive resistance and radical disbelief against it. Racism and queerphobia are still very strong despite their respective movements, as exemplified by the (ongoing as of the writing of this essay) riots in Minneapolis and the various murders of trans women in America, a land where though it may seem otherwise, has gone through many waves of change and more progressive than other countries if we compare it to Africa and the Middle East and despite the radical movements all throughout its history. Even if we disbelieve in these hierarchies, even though if everyone were to one day suddenly decide that black and white were equal and the same, the stratification and reification of these hierarchies and their influence in how we act and what we believe with regards and in relation to that ultimately mean that these hierarchies are still present despite our collective disbelief in them, and therefore due to this reification by society they are a fact that activists should work around to form societies that are separate from it instead of directly against to dismantle something indestructible.

One example that we can use as a case study to disagree with this is how the second wave radical feminist movements came to take hold. After the first wave of the Suffragettes, the second wave of feminism came up and expanded what it means for a woman to be equal to a man and ultimately decided that the main source of oppression within society is the man/woman dichotomy. Instead of radical disbelief in it, a certain section of the movement decided that it would be better off if women would completely separate themselves from men, a political lesbianism. While never reaching a total separation, events such as MichFest, the Michigan Women's Music Festival were widely enjoyed by the women that participated in them as widely free and emancipating from the perpetual fear that patriarchy put them in, with a space for only women, the women there felt free in an experience that many of them described as something that they had never felt before (despite and maybe because of the transphobia, though trans activism hadn't took place as majorly as it did

today). Alongside this, places like convents where only women populate its halls acted as breeding grounds for the rise of feminism. This cannot be construed as a dismantling of the hierarchy by disbelief, because the hierarchy was fought against not by disbelief of it, by putting the man/woman dichotomy in disbelief, but an implicit acceptance of the dichotomy in itself, and separating themselves from it. They fought the institution of patriarchy not by fighting the dichotomy itself, but rather fought around it by seeking to differentiate themselves from it as a separate existence. Works like Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology defined the class of women as something that was biological, immutable and something necessary for the emancipation of women. The existence of the class women was therefore necessary in order to bring forth their emancipation, and therefore cannot be construed as a destruction of the dichotomy. To bring it back to the analogy introduced by Haslanger, this is as if in order to escape the oppression of the popular girls, the dorky girls decide to separate themselves from the popular girls entirely by cutting themselves away from them, and forming their own societies (not nations! Because then you could argue with the failure of homonationalism as written earlier) where they could roam free without the oppression of the popular girls. The dichotomy exists and is still believed in to exist, and both classes still exist, but the hierarchy cannot be acted upon because there is no one to oppress, for the oppressed have exited its hegemony by forming a society without it. **And therefore, the thesis above is false, because the dichotomy still exists despite our disbelief, and therefore the only way to overcome it is to separate ourselves and form our own societies where such hegemonies do not exist.**

To counter this argument, we must first talk about what it means to be a member of either side of the oppressed/oppressor dynamic. This has wide implications, from societal belonging within the ingroup and the certain things that as a member of the societal ingroup you can do which is not seen as a threat of the oppressors against the oppressed, for example, the reclamation of the n-word by black people (as popularly satirised by the n-word pass meme which allows one to freely say the word and the comedy skit where the Penguins of Madagascar stop racism by stopping people from saying the n-word, causing the death of Mrs. Obama at the hands of Donald Trump, Trump being defeated in a puff of logic and the Penguins being awarded an n-word pass from Obama), and similarly the use of other slurs or derogatory terms initially directed at the ingroup from the oppressors and reclaimed as a source of pride, for example ham radio by amateur radio operators or even words as strong as the f-slur for queer people.

To be oppressed is to have gone through the dynamics and expectation of a society that regards you as *less than* in an ultimate sense. A black man is *less than* a white man, a woman is *less than* a man. While how they are regarded as less than may differ, what is invariant throughout all this is that one is regarded as inferior and therefore has rein for the oppressors to act more than them, and carries the implication of treating the oppressed as a faceless group, with black people being seen as inherently committing more crime and women being seen as emotional and perpetually angry. Both of these examples also carry the pathologization of natural human instinct, with increased black crime rates coming from black people living in undesirable, poorer neighbourhoods due to poverty, and women being angry coming from a general maltreatment of them due to having their autonomy being ultimately taken away from them. It is perfectly understandable to bond over these shared

injustices, that is how activism begins, but we must be careful, such that we do not ultimately just move the oppression goalposts away from “us” and on to a separate “them”.

The formation of Liberia, with the slaves who were sent back to Africa being the upper class of this society, oppressing the native Africans, ironically recreating a distorted version of the black/white dynamic within Liberian society, is an example of such a phenomenon occurring, and therefore we should have learned early on that such measures would ultimately not work out.

MichFest was notorious for excluding trans women from its events and allowing trans men into it, a move that was seen as for their own security, the organisers argued. The presence of a penis would ultimately psychologically trigger a lot of the people within the festival, and would lead to a general sense of insecurity within the participants (note that among one of the critiques said by their critics was that they sold dildos at the campsite that was described by one critic as “bigger than any possible penis in real life”). Alongside that, defining a woman as anyone who sees themselves as one would mean that they would not have gone through the same oppressions that women-born-women had to face, and would not have that shared experience of oppression and would not be oppressed, and they would not fit within the oppressed ingroup as defined above and would have to be excluded. This had violent consequences, with many trans women being forcibly kicked out of the event.

To protest this, an event opposite MichFest, Camp Trans took place. Many trans men, invited to the event and who felt that their gender identity was invalidated because of them being seen as very butch lesbians and were seen as a fetish took refuge there. One of the main ideas being thrown around within the camp is a debate about what it means to be oppressed by the oppressed, meaning though the women in MichFest were there to bond over the shared experience over being oppressed as a woman, it ultimately meant the exclusion of certain trans people who did not neatly fit into the categories put in place there. One’s gender there was defined as the category that was assigned at birth to you when you were born, and that experience shaped your entire life as either a man or a woman, as posited by earlier feminists that were grouped under the term TERFs, or trans-exclusionary radical feminists. However, the people at Camp Trans rejected that idea. They argued that if one lives life as a woman or man, despite them not being assigned that gender at birth, why should they be any different than any other people of that gender? The idea of what it meant to be oppressed changed, from one of shared experience emanating from the categories that were put in place when we are born into one that come from the experiences that we share during our life, and the notion that these oppressions could intersect and join together in various ways, marking it as the beginning of third wave feminism, which accepted intersectionality as one of the various tenets of this new movement.

This new movement argued that the sense of oppression that one feels derives not from one certain factor, but a wide range of factors that intersect with each other to form new oppressions, such as the Aunt Jemima stereotype when it comes to black women, as elaborated on by scholars such as bell hooks. They also saw second wave feminism’s rejection of femininity, not as a rejection of the values that were placed on them by the oppressors to make them subservient to men, but rather an attempt to be masculine in order

to be equal to the oppressors, or “dismantling the master’s house with the master’s tools”. This was expanded on in *Whipping Girl*, a memoir by trans feminist Julia Serano who wrote about transmisogyny and how it affected her and other trans people within society. In the book, one person told her about how she wasn’t a feminist because she liked being a woman. The book goes on to talk about the alienation of womanhood from feminism, with the rejection of femininity being alienating for women because they felt as if they had to give up the things they liked in order to seek a feminist ideal of a society without the oppressive standard of femininity. This rhetoric has also been used to attack trans women, with them being seen as hyperfemininity drag queens who act as women in order to fulfill a fetish as written by Blanchard, or perverts who seek to infiltrate women’s spaces as written by Raymond. The book therefore recommends that femininity incorporates certain aspects from which women, cis or trans inherently associate themselves with and should be freed of its oppressive factors to be liberating. What is most notable about this book is that it was written during an era where rejecting femininity was seen as the vogue even in trans spaces, with Serano herself being a butch woman, it would not be until the 2010s after 4chan popularised the idea of the catgirl in the west, the embracement of femininity by transwomen with characters acting as icons such as Ferris from *Re:Zero* and Astolfo from the *Fate* series, and the solidification of such an identity by spaces such as */r/traaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnns* in reddit which acted as a hub for trans thought and memory, and led to the creation of a very feminine “trap culture” within trans spaces, with feminine fashion such as thigh highs (“programming socks”) and dresses being in vogue following the moe/post-moe aesthetic in anime.

Alongside that, what it meant to be a woman changed through this new movement. Judith Butler in her seminal works *Gender Trouble* and its sequel, *Bodies That Matter* recognised gender not as something immutable as written by earlier figures such as Daly, but rather something fluid and something that is performative, as a series of actions, presentation and something that exists by how we are perceived by others. Gender therefore is not something that is immutable and something that one is oppressed over based on that immutable fact, but rather a series of performances and actions that one is oppressed over based on those actions done. This is a very radical departure because of the fact that this means that ultimately, the definition of woman is something that is fluid and ever changing.

The writing of these two figures and many others like them is very major because of the fact that this causes a radical shift in how people such as the MichFest organisers came to be viewed. Instead of creating a space exclusively for women that will ensure their safety, they had ended up reproducing the same hierarchy as before, by enforcing the hierarchy of masculinity/femininity but this time within the class of cis women, and excluding trans women from this as because they were seen as representing the oppressors, the cis women of MichFest had ended up in fact being the oppressors and recreated the cis/trans dichotomy that is the very basis of trans activism. **The counter-argument in fact, is that working around the hierarchies will instead lead one to reproduce them, creating an oppressor/oppressed dynamic, but within the society itself, and can even resemble the dynamics that they sought to eliminate, and therefore to seek liberation, one must get rid of them entirely.**

In summary, an oppressive dichotomy can be defeated by means of a collective radical action against the hierarchies that oppress us, as they can only be defeated outside of the framework of the hierarchies because of the fact that the hegemony created by this hierarchy prevents its own collapse within the hierarchy. While some have argued the way to free oneself from oppression is by creating a new society separate from the oppressors, that has been shown not to work because we bring along the hegemonic thinking alongside us, and therefore we will inevitably end up recreating the oppressor/oppressed dynamic. The only way for total liberation of all men is therefore, the destruction of these dichotomies that rule over us by radical disbelief and rebellious action against them.