

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT TRANS RIGHTS

Masha Gessen on the public discourse over trans identity, the real reasons for the culture war over gender, and how well-meaning people can do better.

By David Remnick

March 11, 2023



The first time I saw Masha Gessen was more than thirty years ago, on the streets of Moscow. This was during the Gorbachev era, the perestroika years, a time of reform and promise. It's hard to imagine it now. As a reporter for the *Washington Post*, I was trying to keep track of the countless ways in which Soviet society was changing. For a long time, despite all the other radical shifts consuming the country, discussion of gay rights was largely absent. In those days, public figures would sometimes proclaim that homosexuality was a repugnant peculiarity of the West and did not exist at home. In the late eighties, the official press declared that H.I.V. was alien to the Soviet Union and had been created by the U.S. defense establishment, in a bioweapons-research lab at Fort Detrick, in Maryland. But by 1990 or so this, too, began to shift. For me, at least, one of the embodiments of this change was the sight of a determined young journalist and activist at the head of a small gay-rights rally near the Bolshoi Theatre. This was Masha Gessen.

Gessen has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 2017 and is best known for their writing on Russia, human rights, democracy and authoritarianism, and, for the past thirteen months, the war in Ukraine. Recently, not long after Gessen returned from a reporting trip to Ukraine, I sent them an e-mail pointing out some of the debates over the way trans issues are being covered and discussed. The latest flash point had been at the *New York Times*. I asked Gessen, who identifies as trans and nonbinary, how *The New Yorker* should be thinking about its own coverage and approach. The reply led to an interview on The New Yorker Radio Hour.

Sign up for the **Puzzles & Games** newsletter.

Get notified when new crosswords, cryptics, and Name Drop quizzes are published on [newyorker.com](https://www.newyorker.com).

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

Gessen was born into a Jewish family in Moscow in 1967. The family moved to the U.S. in 1981, and Masha returned to Moscow in 1991. I first began reading their work, with admiration, in the pages of *Itogi*, a Yeltsin-era magazine led by two talented liberal editors, Sergei Parkhomenko and Masha Lipman. In the years since, Gessen has published books on Putin, the Russian intelligentsia, and many other subjects; their

most recent is “Surviving Autocracy.” This week, it was announced that Gessen won the Blake-Dodd Prize for nonfiction, awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2013, when Vladimir Putin intensified his anti-L.G.B.T.Q. rhetoric and threatened measures to take children away from gay parents, Gessen, who has three children, decided to return to the U.S. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Masha, to hear many Republicans right now, you’d think that L.G.B.T.Q. rights are somehow as big a threat as the new Cold War, or nuclear war. I spoke with Michaela Cavanaugh, a Democratic state senator in Nebraska, who is fighting to block a bill that would withhold gender-affirming care from trans kids, including mental-health care. She told me that the Republicans with whom she legislates aren’t that worked up about trans rights, and that these bills are designed to get airtime on Fox News; they’re a kind of directive from the national party. That seems like a convenient argument for a Democrat who doesn’t want to make too many enemies among her Republican colleagues. What is the motivation for Ron DeSantis, for Donald Trump, for the Republican Party, to make this issue into something so enormous?

I think I probably agree with the state senator a little bit, in the sense that all these bills are about signalling, and what they’re signalling is the essence of past-oriented politics. It’s a really convenient signal because some of the most recent and most rapid social change concerns L.G.B.T. rights in general, and trans rights and trans visibility in particular.

All the autocratic politics that we see around the world right now are past-oriented politics. It’s Putin’s call for a return to “the great Russia” of the past. Note that Putin’s war in Ukraine goes hand in hand with extreme anti-L.G.B.T. rhetoric. In his last speech, he took time to assert that God is male, and that the crazy Europeans and the “Nazi” Ukrainians are trying to make God gender-fluid. I’m not kidding.

Men are men and women are women, and that’s the end of the story.

Right. That simplicity—women are women, men are men. There’s social and financial stability. Where relevant, there’s whiteness. There’s a comfortable and predictable future. That’s a message that says, We’re going to return you to a time when things weren’t scary, when things didn’t make you uncomfortable, when you didn’t fear that your kid was going to come home from school and tell you that they’re trans. Andrew Solomon has written beautifully about this—about the anxiety connected with having children

whose identity is completely different from yours.

Meaning how upsetting that difference is and the appeal of that difference not happening?

Right. Promising to take that fear and anxiety away is truly powerful.

I think many people know you from your coverage of Russia, and now the war in Ukraine. The first time I ever met you, or even saw you, was in 1991. You were leading, or part of, a gay-rights demonstration in Moscow. You're a citizen of both Russia and the United States, and this movement has been a big part of your life. But I thought maybe we'd go back even further in time, for you to tell me about your own journey, about gender, about sexuality, and why this has become such a big part of your life, as well as your journalism and your writing.

Professionally, I started out in gay and lesbian journalism, as it was known, in the mid-eighties. At the time, it was obvious that, if somebody was doing gay and lesbian journalism, they were at least queer. Growing up, I was most definitely trans-identified, except I didn't have words for it.

We're talking how old, then?

Five? Six? I remember, at the age of five, going to sleep in my *dyetski sad*, my Russian preschool, and hoping that I would wake up a boy. A real boy. I had people address me by a boy's name. My parents, fortunately, were incredibly game. They were totally fine with it.

Because they were so broad-minded, or because they just thought it was a passing thing?

I think because they're pretty broad-minded. I remember that in the late seventies—so I would've been ten or eleven years old—they read in a Polish magazine about trans—“transsexual” at that point—surgery, and told me about it. And I said, “Oh, I'm going to have an operation when I grow up.” And they said, “That's fine.” So that was kind of the deal. And then I went through puberty and I could no longer live as a boy so clearly. Then I was a lesbian for many, many years, or more likely queer. But I've always thought of myself as having more of a gender identity than a sexual orientation.

What does that mean?

We were not supposed to talk like this in the eighties and nineties. We were supposed to be very clear about sexual orientation being separate from gender, and that, if you were lesbian, that didn't mean you wanted to be a man. In fact, for a lot of people, it's more complicated than that. It's a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I've always been attracted to both men and women, but I've always been very clearly gender nonconforming.

One of the things that became part of the language at a certain period of time was the following sentence: “Gender is a construct.” I think most people over the centuries thought of gender as something provided by biology. What is the origin of the notion of gender as a construct?

Judith Butler, who certainly did not invent the phrase “gender as a construct” but did a lot to popularize that idea, and an idea of gender as performance, which I think is even more relevant to what we're talking about—she said fairly recently—or, I'm sorry, *they* said fairly recently—in an interview that—

I think it'll be heartening for some to know that you made this mistake. We're leaving it in!

[*Laughs.*] O.K. They said that “gender is imitation without an original.” I think that's a beautiful description, not only of how gender operates but also why we have so much trouble when we do journalism, especially about transgender issues.

What does it mean that it has no “original”?

The simple answer would be—and a lot of standard journalism will give this answer —[that gender and sex are different]. Sex is also not so clear-cut. There are biological determinants of sex that vary from person to person, and there's a small but significant minority of people who cannot be so neatly placed in the male or female sex category. There are expectations of gender, which change with time—historical time and personal time. One of the best quotes I've heard from somebody who studies gender and medical intervention was “Look, the gender of a five-year-old girl and a fifty-year-old woman is not the same.” I thought, You're right. We think of these things as stable and knowable, but they're not. They're fluid by definition, and in our lived experience they're fluid.

I think some people would say that homosexuality is something that we have known about for many, many centuries. It's in our literature, it's in history books, but, somehow, generationally, trans people, with very rare and notable exceptions—Renée

Richards, the tennis player; Jan Morris, the writer—was something that you barely knew about; it seemed extraordinarily exceptional. And then suddenly it becomes part of our modern lives. How do you mark that historically and socially?

So first I want to challenge that a little bit. There's a lot of documentation of people living as the opposite sex in various historical periods. There's a lot of art depicting it—especially the young woman who dresses as a man and goes to war. This is a plot that we see in so many different cultures.

Is a woman who lives her life—a person assigned female at birth, in our modern language—who lives their entire life as a man, marries a woman, and is discovered to have unexpected genitalia after death, is that a transgender person? That's an interesting question, because if they weren't called a transgender person, maybe we don't have a right to call them a transgender person in 2023.

So part of it is not dissimilar to homosexuality, which was something that existed but wasn't talked about, and then, all of a sudden, was out in the open in this country in the late sixties, early seventies. It's also different. Because there's no—and this is where we start getting into so much trouble with journalistic coverage—because it is plainly knowable that so many more people, especially young people, are identifying as transgender than were even ten years ago, even five years ago. The easiest way to try to wrap your mind around it is to pretend that being transgender is again something stable, that being transgender today is exactly the same thing as being transgender twenty years ago, and that we can, say, distinguish it from being homosexual. But we can't. Being transgender today is different from being transgender twenty years ago. Being transgender in a society that understands that some people are transgender is fundamentally different from being transgender in a society that doesn't understand.

And in your own life that's the case?

Absolutely. I remember getting on my bike in Manhattan, maybe four or five years ago, and suddenly realizing that this sense that I am unrecognizable, unintelligible to the world in which I live, was gone. I would bike down the Hudson River Greenway, and people would see a transgender, or gender-nonconforming, person, riding down the Hudson River Greenway. And maybe there would still be children tugging their parents' sleeves and saying, Is that a man or a woman? But fewer. And the parent would probably be able to say, "Well, that's probably a transgender person."

Because the society has changed.

Because the society has changed, yeah. I haven't changed that much in appearance in my life. But, into my fifties, I was somebody who was unintelligible to the world. Suddenly, that was no longer the case.

Masha, whether it's the tumult at the *New York Times* about its coverage of trans issues, or at Netflix about Dave Chappelle and his comedy, to say nothing of the political world, there are so many ways that make it clear that this is a difficult topic for people to talk about. How would you approach talking about trans people? What is the state of the conversation? Where are we? Why is it so fraught and so often painful?

I think it's so painful and so fraught because it is very difficult, in discussing transness, in covering transness, to avoid engaging with the argument about whether trans people actually exist or have the right to exist. That is deeply painful to trans people—and, I would imagine, to people who love trans people. That's actually something that should be off limits. But it is very hard, because, for example, in Emily Bazelon's excellent piece in the *New York Times Magazine* last summer about the battle over transgender treatment, there's a [paraphrased] quote from Andrew Sullivan, the conservative gay journalist, who says, Well, maybe these people would've been gay—implying they're really gay and not really transgender. That really clearly veers into the territory of saying “These people don't exist. They're not who they say they are.” So that's why it's so painful.

So you're saying that Emily Bazelon should not have referenced Andrew Sullivan on that? I think it was a paraphrase of Sullivan rather than a quotation.

I wouldn't have. I think that piece would've been even better without that. As journalists, we're not under obligation to quote every single view on an issue. I think we have the right to exclude the view that somebody's not who they say they are.

I think it's even true, Masha—correct me if I'm wrong—that even you, as a trans person, writing about trans issues, have not escaped getting whacked.

Absolutely. Yes, I was cancelled by trans Twitter once.

What happened?

This is another reason why it's so difficult. Different trans people have vastly different experiences of being trans. I had a whole life as a female person. Not only that, I carried

a pregnancy to term and gave birth and breast-fed, and then, years later, cut off those breasts and am enjoying the effects of that. I didn't start my transition until the age of fifty. I have talked about it as a series of choices that I've made. For a lot of people—and this is also true when we talk about sexuality for a lot of people—it really, truly never feels like a choice. It feels like an existential issue, that there is a single true self. And that single-true-self narrative kind of dominates the trans side of the controversy around coverage of trans issues. I think wrongly so. I think it's one way of living and experiencing life as a trans person.

...I'm really concerned about a lot of the criticism of the coverage of transitions, because, even though I'm very unhappy with a lot of the coverage, I think that criticizing it on the grounds that there's too much of it is wrong and kind of dangerous. The argument generally goes: There's so few trans people, why are you obsessed with them? Well, I'm old enough to have been an AIDS journalist, and I remember when the *New York Times* wasn't covering AIDS because there were so few people affected by it. That's a crazy reason not to cover something! Trans issues are absolutely newsworthy, because it's new. In the sense that the prevalence of people who identify as trans is new, it's literally news. Republicans are making political hay about it—that's news.

Most interestingly—and this is where we get into why it's so difficult—being trans is unlike anything else. Being trans is not a medical condition, but it marries you for life to the medical system. It almost always—not always—involves some kind of medical intervention. How do we think about that? How do we think about the way that people make decisions? Both sides of the debate are really interested in the issue of regret, and look at regret and detransition as a measure of the rightness or wrongness of particular approaches to trans treatment. I hate using the word “treatment.” I'm always stumbling over it because it's not actually treatment, but it is treatment. But it's not a medical condition. One side, especially the opponents of childhood medical intervention for trans-identified kids, say that many of them go on to have regrets and detransition. Proponents say, No, very few of them have regret. I say, Wait a second, kids and their parents, especially teen-agers, make a huge number of decisions that have lifelong implications and are likely to result in regret.

For example?

For example, taking out huge student loans to go to college and being saddled with them for life. For example, joining R.O.T.C. and becoming part of the military for life.

But wait—is that really comparable?

For example, starting to take antidepressants, or other medical treatments. I teach college. Fully half of my students are on some kind of lifelong medical treatment that either their parents or they and their parents together decided to commit to when they were kids or teen-agers. It's not that different—though, no, not the same. And this is where coverage is so difficult, because a lot of trans people, being understandably offended or hurt by some comparisons, say, Don't compare. But the only way we as humans create meaning is that we compare one thing to another and say, O.K., it's like this in some ways, and unlike it in some other ways.

But back to the issue of regret: Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could think of transition as a lifelong option? Some people transition more than once. Some people transition from female to male, and then transition from male to female, and then maybe transition again. That doesn't tell us that their first transition was wrong any more than my living as a woman and being pregnant and having children was wrong. Although I'm sure I would also have lived a very happy life had I had the chance to transition at twenty.

How much do you care about eruptions of conversation and Twitter furor when it comes to, say, J. K. Rowling or Dave Chappelle? Are these important moments in the development of the way we talk about trans people?

Oh. I'm going to get myself into so much trouble. Twitter furor is not generally a useful tool for cultural sense-making. Dave Chappelle, to my mind, is fascinating. I've watched, I think, all or most of his trans jokes recently because I needed to discuss them with somebody, and I found them brilliant and radical. The way, for example, he talks about bathroom bills is quite incredible. So basically the point that I heard him making was that he would rather share the bathroom with a man with a vagina than a woman with a penis. That is a completely next-level, trans-accepting kind of humor. And then I was speaking to a very prominent trans woman writer who was so upset that I liked the Dave Chappelle special because all she heard him say was that her vagina was an Impossible Burger. And I can understand that. I mean, I thought that was funny, but I also didn't take it personally. If we could sit down and discuss these things, especially with Dave Chappelle, I think that would move the conversation forward.

One of the symptoms of the newness and the discomfort among a lot of people with this entire subject is stumbling on pronouns. A couple of years ago, you tweeted, "I

avoided the topic of pronouns for a while, but when my new book was coming out, it seemed I had to make a decision about self-presentation. I am trans, nonbinary, so I asked to be referred to as ‘they.’ It’s been an instructive few weeks.” How was it instructive?

So because I’m nonbinary, I for years said, “Call me they, he, she—but I prefer they.” And so this one writer was writing about my book and wrote to me, “I decided to use she because it was more elegant,” I think he said. Or “easier” or something.

Easier on him.

And I thought, You know what? This was not meant to be for your convenience. I also thought that there are some things that I can do—and I’ve always done this both as a queer person and now as a trans person—when I have a chance to insist on something, because I have prominence as a journalist and a writer, that’ll probably help some eighteen-year-old somewhere who has a lot of trouble insisting and being called they/them. I may care about it less than the eighteen-year-old, but I have more power to enforce it.

We’ve been talking about things that I sense you think are of second-order importance, when it comes to Dave Chappelle or J. K. Rowling. What’s the most important thing right now? What are the issues when it comes to trans people that are most urgent?

I think the [anti-trans] bills around the country are absolutely, crucially important. And part of what makes me think that is that I have seen—not just in Russia but, say, in Hungary, and in Poland—the attacks on L.G.B.T. people, and attacks on what [the attackers] call “gender ideology.”

Which is what?

Gender ideology is the spectre of a totalitarian regime that will enforce gender fluidity. Best as I can interpret it. But gender ideology is a term that appears in Brazil, and in Hungary, and in Russia. It is heavily weaponized by autocrats. I don’t know if you remember, some years ago, there was footage of Judith Butler being attacked, I think, at an airport in Brazil [in 2017]. They were attacked by some person. There was some protest with a placard saying “Down with your gender ideology.” That was, I think, the first time I heard the term.

You speak of Brazil, Russia, Hungary, but let's move closer to home. At CPAC, Michael Knowles from the Daily Wire made a speech calling for the "eradication" of what he called transgenderism. And he then had to clarify that it was not a call to eradicate trans people as such, but an ideology of transgenderism. Is there any distinction?

No, of course there's no distinction. And that's why I started with Russia. I remember, back when I was stupid, about twelve years ago, seeing that there was some regional bill to outlaw L.G.B.T. propaganda and thinking it was ridiculous and wouldn't apply to me. And then, two years later, I was on the run from Russia, because they were actually coming after my kids.

As I recall, somebody in the Russian legislature made specific mention of you.

Correct. It was a politician named Vitaly Milonov who was at the forefront of fighting the L.G.B.T. scourge, who said that all Americans want to do is adopt Russian orphans and raise them in perverted families "like Masha Gessen's." Which was basically a sign to me that I had to get my adopted son out of the country, which also meant I had to leave the country. When I see that transgender care for adults is likely to become illegal in some states, then I know that my testosterone in New York is probably not as safe as I think it is.

Last week, both Mississippi and Tennessee banned gender-affirming health care for trans youth. When we talk about gender-affirming care, let's be clear: what specifically are we talking about, there or anywhere?

This is actually another topic where I think that criticism of the journalism is misguided, because some of the criticism of the journalism has been: Don't question standards of care. Well, it is our job as journalists to question standards of care. Journalists should absolutely question standards of care. And there's some legitimate controversy about standards of care for trans youth. What's completely uncontroversial is social transition. What's largely uncontroversial is—

By social transition, you mean?

I mean living as the gender that the person identifies as; fully changing names, changing pronouns, et cetera. What's not terribly controversial is hormone treatment in young people who have gone through puberty. And what is somewhat controversial is puberty blockers, which are in many places the standard of care. Puberty blockers are exactly

what they sound like; they delay puberty. Certainly, people's experience is that, if they don't go through the puberty of the sex with which they don't identify—[if] they don't grow breasts, or they don't grow hair and testicles—then it'll be much easier to transition when they start receiving hormone treatment. There are some studies that point to potential risks of long-term—more than a year or so—use of puberty blockers. That is absolutely a legitimate topic of discussion. But, of course, it's become very difficult to cover because of bills in Texas, Mississippi, Florida, Arkansas, and other states that lump all of these treatments in the same bucket, and seek to outlaw, or have already outlawed, all of them.

Where does surgery come in?

Surgery is very, very rarely something that people under eighteen have.

I ask because it seems to me that, when I listen to the rhetoric of the right, you would think that surgery on very young people without parents knowing is somehow sweeping the country.

As far as I know, it's not a thing.

Why do insurance companies frequently require psychological evaluation, sometimes from multiple sources, to corroborate the need for gender-affirming care, when psychological evaluation is not required for comparable forms of medicine and procedures in non-trans people?

I'll tell you more, David. When I was fifty-one and had top surgery and paid out of pocket for it, I still had to get a letter from my physician and a psychiatrist.

Masha, do you think the left generally does a good job of speaking on trans issues in a way that a broader public can understand? In other words, we've been talking about CPAC, we've been talking about the Republican Party, Ron DeSantis, Trump, and the rest. What about the other side of things?

I want to be generous about this because—

Why?

Well, because I want to acknowledge the difficult situation that we're in. I'm very frustrated with both L.G.B.T.-activist organizations and other prominent advocacy organizations over the very reductive ways in which they frame trans issues. For

example, framing access to gender-affirming care for trans youth as a question of suicide and survival. There's an extremely high rate of suicide risk among trans people in general, but gender-affirming care doesn't actually seem to be the answer to the suicide risk. Maybe more social acceptance is the answer. In general, the Democratic Party follows the lead of advocacy organizations, which is actually good. The blame is with the advocacy organizations. But it's very hard to blame the advocacy organizations for not being complex and nuanced in their rhetoric when the right is on such a rampage. So that's why I want to be generous.

Sure. We talked about the New York Times. The Atlantic also sparked a lot of backlash in 2018 over a cover article about detransitioning ["When Children Say They're Trans," by Jesse Singal]. We touched on this earlier, but has the amount of coverage that detransitioning received in the media been skewed? Has that altered your perception of how the press is covering this in general?

Yeah. I think there's way too much focus on detransitioning. And what I think that's about, in part, it's almost like what Susan Sontag called the sex exception, except it's the gender exception. We normalize regret in other areas of life. We do things and then we regret them. We have children and regret it. All the time. It's perfectly normal. [*Laughs.*]

Speak for yourself! He quickly added.

But we think that something so catastrophic happens to a person who transitions. . . . There's this book, from a few years ago, by Abigail Shrier, called "Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters." The idea is that you do something to yourself that you will never gain back. And in particular she was talking about girls making the choice to forfeit being able to bear children. Which, yes, is a big thing, but also not a unique thing, not a life-ruining thing, necessarily. But we do talk about it as though, of all the losses a person can have in their life, this is one that we can't make up for.

What are the biggest mistakes that well-meaning people make when they talk about trans people?

I think probably the biggest mistake is not recognizing that there are different ideas about transness within the trans community. Probably different trans communities. Certainly different experiences of transness. That, for some people, it's an essential part of themselves. Some people are truly binary. Some people are truly nonbinary. Some people are still in negotiation with their identity.

What do you hope for our own publication as we move forward and we write about this, grapple with this, think about this? What should we be doing, and how do we get better?

I think one thing that I'm really happy to have been able to do is just write about trans people as though there's nothing unusual about trans people.

Where the transness is almost incidental to what you're writing.

Exactly. We have to wade into this controversy, which does exist. Some of the criticism of trans coverage in the *Times* and elsewhere has said, Oh, it's a manufactured culture war. Well, of course. All culture wars are manufactured, but this one is happening. So we have to figure out a way to cover it, I think, in a complicated way. ♦



*David Remnick has been editor of *The New Yorker* since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of "The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama."*