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Obsession with gender identity goes too far

However strongly we identify ourselves in a particular way, none of us has a right to expect everyone else to approve

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In the run-up to the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 I lost several nights' sleep. As an Anglo-Scot, born north of the border and educated south of it, I had never considered myself to be simply "English" or "Scottish", but always "British". So when, at the eleventh hour, polls suggested that Scotland might vote to leave and break up the United Kingdom, I suffered an existential crisis. I faced the prospect of losing my identity, and it distressed me very deeply.

But should that matter to anybody else? After all, the pain of having to call myself "English" is barely visible in the wide ocean of human suffering. And besides, the depth of my attachment to an identity cannot be the measure of its worth. The mere fact that I felt viscerally British couldn't mean that my national identity was worth holding on to.

Perhaps, after all, the Scottish separatists were right and Britishness is essentially imperialist and wicked

and to be repented of? In the end, I decided they were wrong and that Scottish independence is an ideological solution in search of an actual problem, that the United Kingdom remains very good for lots of things, and that it's well worth identifying with.

But the main point is this: I had to justify my feelings about my identity. It wasn't enough that I happened to feel it deeply. I didn't expect that my sense of who I am should command unthinking allegiance or compliance in others. And that's true of any identity. Not all are equal. Some are worth holding on to; others are best jettisoned. No identity deserves uncritical respect.

I'm not surprised that Obama was puzzled by this for I am too

So when it comes to the issue of gender identity I remain stubbornly sceptical. In April 2016 Maria Munir, a university student and member of Young Leaders UK, decided to come out as "non-binary" at a public gathering in the presence of President Obama. She did so in order to raise the profile of transgender people who are being refused "their human right to be

recognised as they wish". Observing that her own Pakistani Muslim community has difficulty grasping such a "complex concept", she explained that non-binary "describes anyone who feels that they do not exclusively fit the accepted definitions of man and woman". Obama, apparently, was "puzzled". I'm not surprised, for so am I. I'm not yet capable of being transphobic, because before I can fear or hate something, I have to achieve some idea of what it means. And, frankly, I struggle to make sense of the claims of the new transgenderism.

Trust me, I do understand the difference between sexual physiology, the orientation of sexual desire, and the gender roles assigned men and women by social convention. I'm enough of a feminist to believe that women and men shouldn't be bound by the social stereotypes that reigned up until the 1960s. And I'm enough of a liberal to believe that the law should allow individuals to arrange physiology, desire and role in whatever permutation they fancy. I also understand that non-conformists need protection from bullying or worse, and that those whose "gender dysphoria" has been caused by a disturbed upbringing deserve psychotherapeutic help. I get all that.

But what I don't get is the demand that society should reform its language, its census forms, its lavatories, and its sleeping arrangements around an ever-growing taxonomy of genders, which takes its bearings from stereotypes that have long been discredited, and either says nothing new or vanishes into private obscurity. So, for example, we're told that "non-binary" describes any gender that

Plenty of people are in greater need of help, like Syrian refugees

transcends the "accepted system" of male and female. But beyond the one that feminism has already dismantled, what other system remains? Further, where exactly does the difference lie between "bi-gender" (combining male and female) and "inter-gender" (somewhere in between them), and how do these amount to anything more than the feminist rejection of traditional stereotypes? And in the case of "agender" and "aporagender", which supposedly transcend maleness, femaleness and anything in between, what qualities are left to give them meaning?

But, most of all, why should we

care? Whatever transgender-identity is supposed to be, what's it good for? What does it achieve? The strength of felt attachment alone can't endow it with value. So my attitude towards transgenderism is very much like the historian Brad Faught's weary response to fashionable speculation about the "essential sexual self" of Field Marshal Kitchener, who tended to surround himself with young unattached males and liked to collect porcelain. "Just what," Faught asks, "does a vestigial femininity, perhaps suggestive of homosexuality, have to do with the outcome of the Battle of Omdurman or the South African War or the establishment of the New Armies in 1914-15? How much does it really matter?"

There are plenty of people out there who are in urgent need of our help — from the millions of older people who live alone in Britain to Syrians at the wrong end of Assad's merciless stick. In their light, obsessing about the social recognition of elusive transgender identities does look awfully like fiddling with our navels while Rome burns.

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