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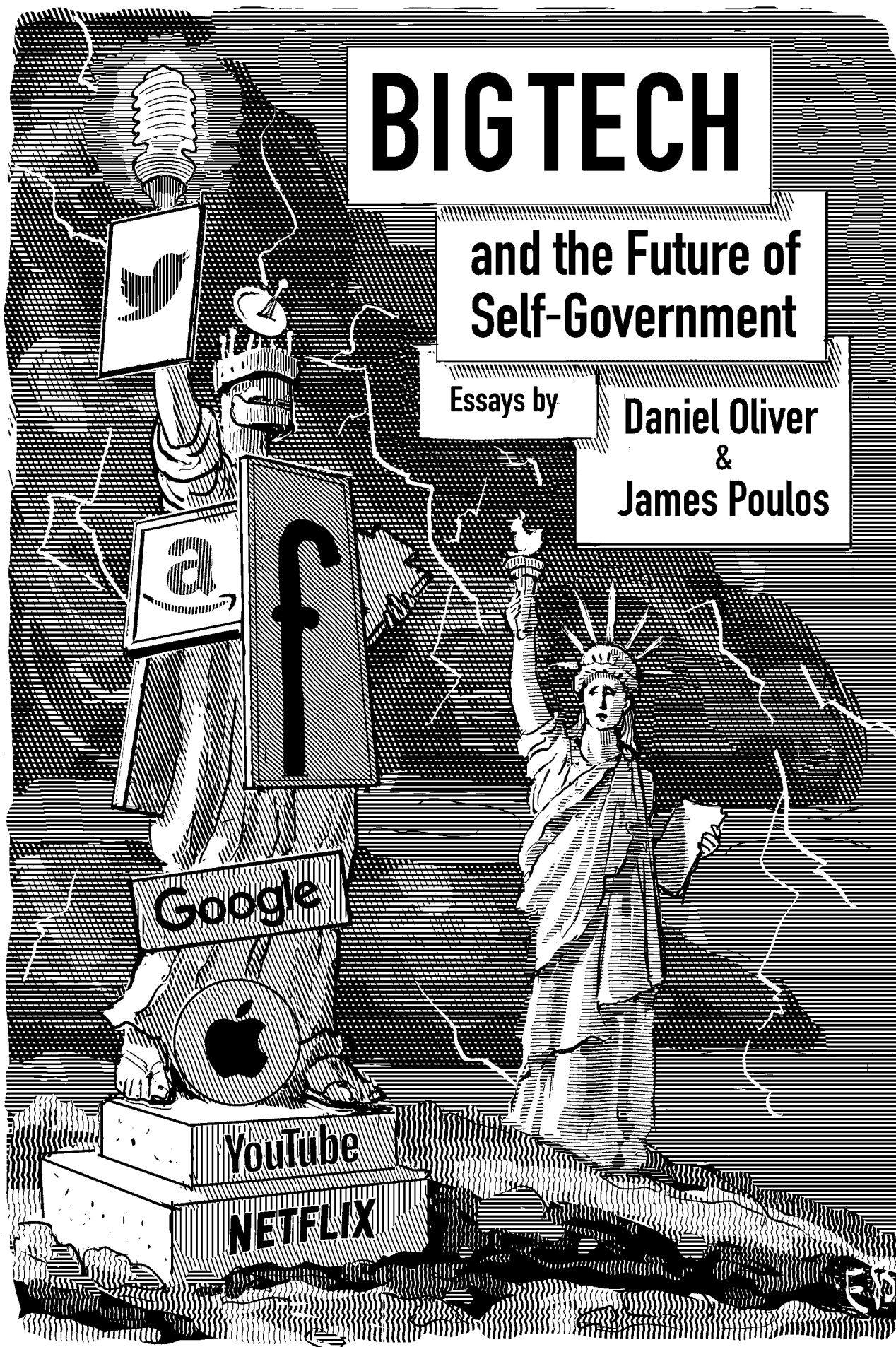
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Book Review by Mary Eberstadt

GIRLS WILL BE BOYS

Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters, by Abigail Shrier.
Regnery Publishing, 276 pages, \$28.99

The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society, by Debra Soh.
Threshold Editions, 336 pages, \$28 (cloth), \$16.99 (paper)



THE STORMING OF THE UNITED STATES Capitol last January 6, spearheaded in part by followers of the internet craze known as QAnon, set off soul-searching among conservatives. Suddenly, those who had only a dim awareness of Q & Co. were forced to confront just how embedded its worldview had become. Was Donald Trump waging a secret war against Satanic pedophiles within the Deep State which would culminate in a millenarian “Storm,” sending enemies off to Guantanamo and inaugurating a new era in human affairs? Before the riot, such mythology seemed comfortably obscure.

Though QAnon is typically dubbed a “conspiracy theory,” it is—or perhaps was—more

accurately described as a cult: an all-encompassing belief system. QAnon bustled with energy, online communities, constant updates, branches in other countries, and fascinating, albeit byzantine, storylines. It generated robust merchandising wings. Its chatter was ceaseless—earnest and self-absorbed, boosterish, Manichean, empirically insolvent, punitive toward unbelievers. Above all, it was a craze unthinkable without the internet.

EVEN SO, THE EXISTENCE OF A MANIC cult with deep roots in social media should not really have surprised anyone—least of all conservatives. After all, the Western world has been living for years

with another all-encompassing belief system, lodged on the other side of the political spectrum. This one, too, bustles with energy, online communities, constant updates, branches in other countries, and fascinating, albeit byzantine, storylines. It, too, has generated robust merchandizing wings. Its chatter is also constant—earnest and self-absorbed, boosterish, Manichean, empirically insolvent, punitive toward unbelievers. Above all, it, too, is a craze unthinkable without the internet.

The difference is that QAnon never penetrated the medical establishment, elite and mainstream media, entertainment industry, academia, public schools, corporations, polite society, churches, all three branches of

the federal government, and, increasingly, the American legal system. The other craze has.

IN THE HOPE OF RALLYING THE broadest possible constituency for a limited return to sanity in these matters, I will focus on one subset of transgenderism: so-called “trans kids,” specifically, minor girls who want to be boys.

Before the phrase “trans kids” was even in circulation, a few brave and pioneering souls set forth informed analyses of other aspects of transgenderism. This body of work includes, above all, the lifelong labors of Dr. Paul McHugh, longtime chief of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Also vital are Ashley McGuire’s *Sex Scandal: The Drive to Abolish Male and Female* (2017); Ryan T. Anderson’s landmark *When Harry Became Sally: Understanding the Transgender Moment* (2018—recently punished by removal from Amazon); Douglas Murray’s *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (2019); writings by social conservatives like Rod Dreher; and an assortment of works by those whom the trans movement has derisively dubbed TERFs—“Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists.”

To these examples of sober reasoning come two new additions: journalist Abigail Shrier’s *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, and neuroscientist Debra Soh’s *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society*. Both authors emphasize that they are not “judging” adult “transitioning”—likely because separating the question of minors from that of “consenting adults” might more easily change some minds. Soh’s book is a methodical, informed, spirited restating of truths about sex and gender that are no less true for having become verboten in fashionable circles (its dedication gamely reads, “For all the people who blocked me on Twitter”). Shrier’s volume is bold, thorough, luminously argued, and compassionate. Based on almost 200 interviews and over four dozen families of adolescents, it is the indispensable work on the question of why “gender dysphoria” has surged dramatically among adolescent girls during the last few years.

“Before 2012,” Shrier notes, “there was no scientific literature on girls ages eleven to twenty-one ever having developed gender dysphoria at all.” Now, for the first time, “natal girls” are the majority of patients identifying as “transgender.” The statistics speak for themselves. In Britain, for example, the National Health Service reports that the largest “gender clinic” in the country saw 2,500 referrals in 2018-19, including children as

young as three—a 25-fold increase in the last decade, mainly for girls “transitioning” into boys.

THE QUESTION IS WHY?—AND THE answer isn’t always nature. The notion that girls who want to be boys are just “born that way” took a serious hit in 2018, when Lisa Littman—a doctor and assistant professor at Brown University—gave a 90-question survey about “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” to 256 parents of such teenagers. The results established that these particular girls had not always been unhappy as girls. Instead, they were responding to a social contagion. As Soh summarizes, “none met the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria in childhood.” Rather, “[f]or about 40 percent of those adolescents, more than half of their friend groups had also come out as transgender. *This is more than seventy times the prevalence of transgender adults in the general population*” (emphasis added).

Another reason to focus on adolescent girls is humanitarian. What some teens are doing to themselves (or allowing to be done to them) in the name of becoming “trans” is so masochistic as to jolt even the shock-proof: wearing breast binders whose side effects include breathing trouble and tissue destruction; taking puberty-blocking hormones that can destroy fertility; undergoing mastectomies that gouge out healthy breasts, and leave gruesome scars; attempting “phalloplasties,” or the creation of appendages with flesh stripped from a girl’s forearm, leading to more permanent scars; enduring hysterectomies of uteri that atrophy under the influence of testosterone; and more in this ghoulish vein. The trans youth cult demands sacrifices.

Simultaneously, thriving commercial markets benefit entrepreneurs clever enough to have spied needs that never before existed, such as rubber and plastic fake penises, through which girls can urinate standing up; other devices with which to “pack” underwear; and all manner of accoutrement beloved by children and teenagers, especially females, re-branded with the trans label—stickers, pins, T-shirts, phone covers, coffee mugs, water bottles, and whatever other merchandise it takes to make a girl feel more like a boy.

All of which brings us back to QAnon. If cults like QAnon are bad for the country, and bad for the people swept up in them, then the same must be true of other cults to which they bear family resemblance. That is the problem for the transgender phenomenon among children and teenagers.

Consider seven features shared by both the QAnon and youth transgender crazes:

1. *Both mythologies are protected and enforced by punitive reprisals, especially on social media.*

What is born on the internet will be punished on the internet. Like any good policy, online intimidation serves a multiplicity of purposes. It diminishes incentives for anyone on the outside to question the movement; it validates communal bonds by creating common enemies; and it signals to those within the group that ranks are never to be broken without penalty. Thus, for example, an article on QAnon in the *Atlantic* in 2020 noted that many insiders would not speak with the reporter for fear of communal retaliation.

Even so, policing by the trans enforcers is singularly fierce. Soh explains the instantaneous combustion of online hostility guaranteed to greet anyone perceived by followers as an enemy. Following her own first experience of the electronic storm, she writes,

Then, you’ll be flooded. You won’t be able to refresh your notifications fast enough.... A few brave souls [on her social media] did try calling for a gentler approach. They were immediately pounced on and drowned out by the mob. Some of my defenders went so far as to offer contrition, thanking their mobbers for “educating” them and apologizing for defending a transphobe.... A friend of mine was similarly mobbed several years later for stating on social media that only women could get pregnant. After sustaining several days of online persecution, she told me, slightly shaken, “I’m never tweeting about trans issues again.”

Unlike the online punishments inflicted by devotees of other crazes, those of the trans sect are reinforced and amplified across the wider society. That makes them even more minatory.

Shrier’s book was banned by Target, for example, and became the object of calls for censorship, including by the ACLU. *When Harry Became Sally* author Ryan T. Anderson has been serially harassed in real life as well as online. He and others who speak without cant about the trans phenomenon have been penalized with organized hostility: campus protests, demands for extra security, anonymous online threats, orchestrated bombardment with negative reviews on Amazon and elsewhere. The commercial takedown of best-selling author J.K. Rowling, who dared to object to the notion that men belong in female spaces, became a *cause célèbre*.

2. *QAnon and the trans-kids craze each have a creation story of “red-pilling” and a trendsetting founder.*

Another common denominator is the “aha!” moment when the old world falls away, and the new one is revealed to the believer in all its reality. In both movements, this transcendent awareness happens only after extraordinary time is spent online, learning the liturgy and rites of the e-community.

Repeatedly, Soh and Shrier mention the centrality of internet rabbit holes among those caught in the trans craze—exactly as believers have described the descent into QAnon. After enough time in the ether, “The world opened up in Technicolor for me,” a self-described QAnon “meme queen” told the *New York Times*. “It was like the Matrix—everything just started to download.” Subjects in *Irreversible Damage* describe similar moments of epiphany (or “red-pilling”) leading up to full-fledged communal membership: watching that first video of a trans tastemaker; taking that first shot of testosterone; enduring that first day in a binder.

In both cases, red-pilling comes with another benefit: instant, often massive online acclaim. *Irreversible Damage* describes the exhilarating trajectory of one lonely, anxious teenager:

And then something magical happened. Helena “came out” on Tumblr. Her

number of followers skyrocketed. Her online “friends” enthused over her decision to come out and her “cute” new name. She was freer online than she had ever been in real life. Social media offered the possibility of an edited persona, of only showing the best of herself—and only when she wanted to.

In another interesting common denominator, both online sects burst into existence relatively recently via a foundational revelation by an incarnated leader. To QAnoners, enlightenment began with Q’s electrifying first information drop (“bread crumb”) in 2017. To the trans-kid craze, revelation arrived first with six-year-old YouTube star Jazz Jennings’s 20/20 interview with Barbara Walters in 2007; and next, via Caitlyn Jenner’s culture-shocking 2015 appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

3. Both QAnon and the trans-kid movement have been exploited by politicians.

The syllogism here is simple. Political leaders seek followers and attention. Crazes acquire ardent devotees, concentrated in online “communities.” Ergo, for the sake of more traffic, more eyeballs, more followers, and, it is hoped, more votes, some politicians unwisely try to co-opt crazes.

That is exactly what happened in the years leading up to January 6: a few Republicans became familiar enough with Q-speak to wink and nod in ways that energized the group. These appear to have included President Trump, whose episodic Q-inflected pronouncements were taken by cultists as proof that he understood and embraced them. Note the critical difference here between the Q craze and the trans-kid craze: only a handful of Republican leaders have flirted with QAnon. But almost *all* leading Democrats, and many other sources of cultural authority, are compromised by the trans youth movement.

Within just a few years, deviation from its dogmas has become unthinkable for just about every liberal and progressive in the Western world—and for many others. Using the “wrong” pronouns or “dead-naming” (using a trans person’s birth name) are now firing offenses. Educators have been ousted from their jobs. Among those who remain, recanting has become more common than under Savonarola.

Those are astonishing facts. Trans-kid clout was evident when President Biden threw female athletes under the glitter bus in one of his first executive orders. Such prioritizing may have puzzled those worrying over other issues, like a global pandemic and nation-

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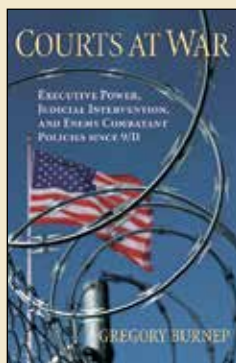
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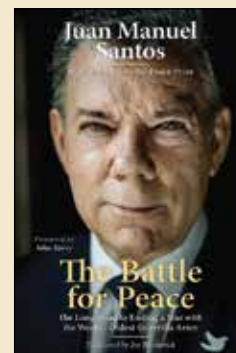
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wide vaccine distribution. In truth, though, the president's supplication was not puzzling at all. Democratic politicians now tremble to find themselves on the wrong side of the trans-kid lobby.

4. *Both crazes claim unique salvific missions involving children, which serve to rationalize their tactics in the eyes of followers.*

Both groups voice the mantra that "children will die" if cultists fail to act as they do, and both have used that claim to justify their extremism.

For QAnon—as for "Pizza-gate" before it—the putatively endangered are children who are said to be trafficked by "Deep State" cannibal-pedophiles. For trans believers, they are children and adolescents who want to "transition," and who (it is said) will kill themselves if thwarted. As with most conspiracy theories, this implied threat connects tangentially to reality: people who consider themselves transgender are indeed at higher risk of suicide throughout their lives. All the more salient, then, is the fact that mental-health problems persist despite hormonal and surgical interventions. As the editors of the *American Journal of Psychiatry* put it in a correction published in 2020, summarizing findings of the largest database yet on sex-reassignment proce-

dures, "the results demonstrated no advantage of surgery in relation to subsequent mood or anxiety disorder-related health care."

Trans-kid activists sacralize suicide and sadness to silence critics—especially parents—with an incantation: *Would you rather have a dead daughter, or a live son?* As *Irreversible Damage* shows, such manipulation disarms the very people who would otherwise be first to protect adolescents from harm: mothers and fathers. It also intimidates other adults, such as those in the medical community, who know that genital mutilation and fertility destruction among minors are wrong, but fear to say so.

"Children will die" is the apotheosis of what psychologists call "permission-granting behavior." It licenses all interventions to stave off the supposed catastrophe and demonizes anyone who objects.

This silencing is all the more dangerous precisely because of the elevated suicide risk among trans kids. Since so many present with co-morbidities—depression, anxiety, cutting, bulimia, and anorexia, among them—it stands to reason that aggressively treating those ailments would improve mental health. Instead, as the case of Keira Bell in the United Kingdom proved vividly, the medical establishment typically adopts a "trans-first" policy, opting for

hormones and related chemical/surgical fixes over detailed investigations and amelioration of accompanying problems.

Everyone should be alarmed by suicide rates among all adolescents, including and especially those at highest risk. Tragically, turning a blind medical eye toward the reality of mental and other problems among trans kids is counterproductive at best. At a minimum, ignoring their other afflictions doesn't help.

5. *Both cults harbor anti-empirical beliefs about human embodiment.*

Something about crazes originating and pursued fanatically online seems to disconnect believers from the reality of their material being.

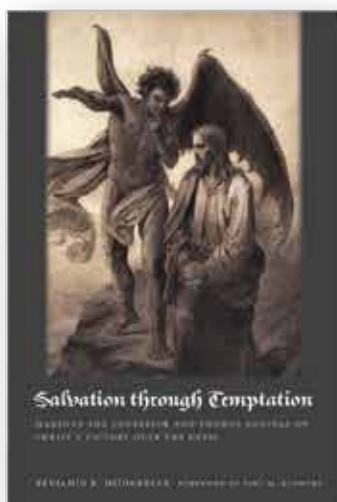
Thus, for instance, some QAnon followers overlap with another internet cult that believes in "lizard people" who are said to shape-shift and secretly run the world. (Some also believe that Michelle Obama is really a man.) And members of the transgender youth cult believe that by trying hard enough, they can leave behind the body to which they were born, and truly become a member of the opposite sex. Soh also mentions the disembodied nature of "fantasies [that] can additionally revolve around shape-shifting and body-switching, in which a person unexpectedly transforms into the op-

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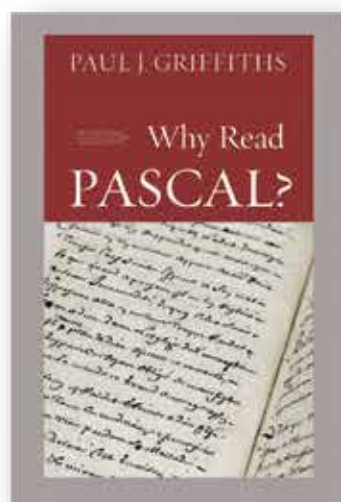


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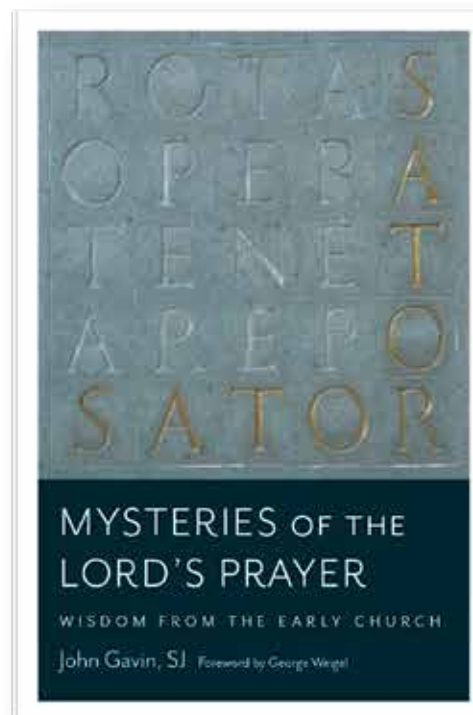
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posite sex by way of sci-fi themed occurrences, like alien abductions, ingesting magical potions, and drifting into outer space.”

Inter alia, this uncanny conjunction of sorcerous beliefs suggests a new avenue for psychological research. Maybe living too long within the two-dimensional reality of the internet corrodes one’s sense of three-dimensional reality—including the three-dimensional reality of one’s own body and ineradicable DNA.

6. *Both cults are seized upon by emotionally vulnerable populations.*

Over and over, the parents and de-transitioners interviewed by Shrier and described by Soh exhibit the same psychological and social traits: isolation, spectrum issues, anxiety, panic, internet addiction. The majority of the girls in Shrier’s study have mental-health problems in their medical history. Many have been drawn to other forms of self-harm, such as cutting, burning, anorexia, and bulimia.

QAnon’s demographic is poorer, older, and appears far more male. Yet the psychological vulnerabilities bear comparison. Each inductee begins with the notion that “reality” is something other than what it appears to be—something other than what one has been told. And the lives of those drawn into Q’s worldview abound with triggers similar to those of Shrier’s subjects: atomization, addiction, social withdrawal, family struggles—and, to repeat *ad nauseum*, an inordinate amount of time on the internet, obsessively following the movement. In a telling and positive case mentioned in *Irreversible Damage*, one teenager got off the trans track after her mother arranged for her to live on a horse farm for a year—without internet.

7. *Both cults have been fueled by familial disruption, including disruption egged on by fellow believers.*

In the weeks following the mayhem at the Capitol, media profiles of QAnon believers revealed a common pattern: in many cases, alarmed family members had struggled to break the group’s hold over their loved ones. As a headline in the *Washington Post* put it, “QAnon is Tearing Families Apart.”

So is the trans-kid craze, as examples from *Irreversible Damage* and *The End of Gender* show. The difference is that trans members are explicit in *wanting* to sever family ties if they stand in the way of cult beliefs. “Deceiving parents and doctors is justified if it helps transition,” as Shrier explains the reasoning. Such sleight of hand is ubiquitous. Merchandisers disguise their wares: “binders [and other products] are typically sold in discreet packaging so as not to tip off unsupportive parents.”

As Anderson reports in *When Harry Became Sally*, some schools have further developed protocols to help minor students “transition” without parents knowing it. Meanwhile, online influencers—today’s equivalent of teen idols—promise that transitioning will deliver “glitter families” and “queer families” to replace insufficiently supportive real ones.

THROUGHOUT THE EFFORTS TO mainstream transgenderism, much has been written about the philosophical and metaphysical meaning of phrases like “being born into the wrong body.” Simultaneously, evidence from *Irreversible Damage* and *The End of Gender* suggests explanations for the trans craze among young girls, at least, that are more earthbound.

The first is the use of testosterone. “T” apparently acts as a miracle drug—especially on the anxious, spectrum-adjacent, upper-middle class girls who account for much of today’s “transitioning.” Imagine a substance that simultaneously carves away body fat from unwanted areas, that makes users feel stronger, that makes them *literally* stronger, and that induces a sense of confidence previously lacking. Such are the described effects of T. Small wonder that several of Shrier’s subjects use the word “addictive” to describe the drug.

Additional evidence can be found in Andrew Sullivan’s vivid description of the effects of testosterone shots, from an article written in 2000:

My appetite in every sense of that word expanded beyond measure. Going from napping two hours a day, I now rarely sleep in the daytime and have enough energy for daily workouts and a hefty work schedule.... Depression, once a regular feature of my life, is now a distant memory.... Within hours, and at most a day, I feel a deep surge of energy.... In a word, I feel braced. For what? It scarcely seems to matter.

What fretful, lonely, hesitant girl *wouldn’t* want such a boost—especially when it also guarantees a cascade of dopamine hits from rapturous affirmation online? In a way that has not been understood, and needs to be, the transgender phenomenon among girls is cosmetic pharmacology unbound. All the more reason to note T’s other consequences: it increases irritability and aggression; it adds pounds in the same areas that it does in men; it makes male body hair and male scents erupt from female skin. Above all, when injected for long enough, it also irreversibly lowers the voice, withers the vagina and uterus, and destroys the possibility of childbearing.

A second answer to the question posed tacitly by *Irreversible Damage* and *The End of Gender* entails a glance at our civilization, and what it has become. Why, indeed, might record numbers of today’s girls hate being girls?

Just look at the sea in which they swim. As children—and forever afterward, thanks to the internet—girls face a world abounding with frightening phenomena, including violent, unregulated, ubiquitous pornography. Meanwhile, from elementary school onward, girls are told by health officials and other influencers that sexual activity is expected of them; if they demur, they are made to feel retrograde and unpopular. Those who turn to religion for solace risk being pinned with the new scarlet letters: H and B, for hater and bigot. Simultaneously, given the shrinkage and implosion of the family, girls have fewer fathers, brothers, uncles, or other men in their lives who might act as reality checks, helping to protect them from chemical, surgical, and commercial exploitation.

What finally unites online cult members is the unbearable heaviness of their beings—the alienation from friends and family, when friends and family are the enduring medicine for what ails people. For this reason, the transgender kid craze is uniquely calamitous. Thanks to it, that foundational terror of being alone will become a self-fulfilled prophecy among girls robbed of nature’s own preferred answer to loneliness: procreation.

SOMEDAY, THE SELF-DEALING AUTHORITIES who stoke the trans-kid craze will answer for it—the corrupt doctors and politicians, the rubber-stamping “gender theorists,” the online voyeurs, the merchants, including Planned Parenthood, who make a buck off this pathos.

Meanwhile, fellow citizens can step up. If destroying the reproductive organs of healthy adolescents isn’t objectionable, not much is. Social conservatives are doing their part to protect against the trans-kid craze. Now others can help, too. May the individual Ls, Gs, Bs, and adult Ts who want no part of this experiment repudiate the claim that they endorse it. May the landmark Keira Bell lawsuit in the United Kingdom—which resulted in prohibiting kids from access to puberty blockers without court approval—be the first of many.

Now that we have *Irreversible Damage* and *The End of Gender*, it’s past time to stand up for the obvious.

Mary Eberstadt holds the Panula Chair at the Catholic Information Center and is a senior fellow at the Faith and Reason Institute.

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