

## Are New Gender Beliefs Based on Science and Research?

PETER HUSTON

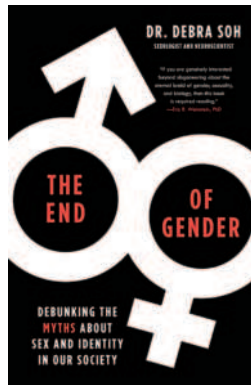
There's been some strange paradigm shifts among the educated classes of the Western world lately concerning gender. For one thing, in some circles, people are asked to state their gender and give their preferred pronouns. Controversies exist about bathroom assignment. Specialized therapists, speakers, and publications have emerged to encourage the wider public to develop greater sensitivity and new mores and etiquette for emerging genders.

This, of course, would normally be none of my business. To each his, her, their, aers, faers, airs, pers, vis, xyrs, or hirs—to include the new pronouns—own business. Still, important social and medical issues are involved, such as at what age it is appropriate for a child, or the child's parent, to declare the child transgender or seek physical treatments such as hormone injections or mastectomies.

Again, this would be an interesting and important subject, but it is likely outside the purview of this magazine.

What interests us here is how much of this is based on science and research, as well as how much of this is affecting scientific research in this area. Debra Soh's *The End of Gender: Debunking Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* is a readable book that attempts to answer these questions and provide a full discussion on current gender beliefs and science. She also looks at the controversies, pseudoscience, bad science, and social assertions being used in place of real science to guide important life-changing decisions and educational, medical, and legal policies.

Soh is a neuroscientist who specializes in human sexuality, gender, and paraphilias. A doctoral graduate of York University, she has been widely published in both popular and academic cir-



*The End of Gender: Debunking Myths about Sex and Identity in our Society.* By Debra Soh. New York, NY: Threshold Editions, 2020. ISBN 9781982132514. 322 pp. Hardcover, \$28.00; softcover, \$16.99.

cles. Lately, as a quick visit to YouTube can confirm, she's often interviewed as a critic of several popular gender-related beliefs.

Her book is structured in an introduction, a conclusion, and nine middle chapters. Each chapter debunks one "myth" (her term) that is commonly believed about sex, gender, gender identity, gender fluidity, the handling of transgender issues, their social and medical implications, and related issues.

In order, the nine beliefs that she examines and debunks are 1) "biological sex is a spectrum," 2) "gender is a social construct," 3) "there are more than two genders," 4) "sexual orientation and gender identity are unrelated," 5) "children with gender dysphoria should transition," 6) "no difference exists between trans women and women who were born women," 7) "women should behave like men in sex and dating," 8) "gender neutral parenting works," and 9) "sexology and social justice make good bedfellows."

This is a lot to take on, and there is a lot of information in this book, some of which inspires further questions. For instance, according to Soh, up until relatively recently most transgender people were born biologically male but felt themselves to be female, yet now an increasing number are young women who

are transitioning to males. Why the change? It's tough to say with absolute certainty, but social factors are certainly a major factor.

People are also being designated as "non-gender conforming" at earlier and earlier ages. Why? Again, Soh argues it's due to social factors and that if left unlabeled, most children who announce they want to be the opposite sex grow up to be either gay or lesbian and feel no need to physically transition.

Throughout her book, Soh discusses how research is discouraged, distorted, or suppressed, with some topics being considered offensive or insensitive. For instance, there is a condition called "autogynephilia." Normally seen in males, it involves people who become sexually aroused and at times even achieve orgasm while cross-dressing. Soh discusses whether it is linked with the desire among some men to become women. In that context, she says researchers of the topic are facing harassment.

Researchers looking into "desistance," or the remittance of feelings of gender dysphoria naturally over time, are also discouraged and even harassed. Although widely documented, the topic, according to Soh, does not fit the paradigm many activists promote. She writes that while brain studies indicate that some people are innately gay or les-

bian, the studies that discuss the brains of non-gender-conforming people are often either flawed in various ways or the evidence is overstated. She questions the paradigm believed in many circles that a person born male must declare themselves non-male to act feminine or that women cannot enjoy traditionally masculine activities while continuing to consider themselves women. She wonders if many celebrities who publicly announce a change in their pronouns might merely be seeking publicity. And, of course, she mentions detransitioners, the small but increasing number of young adults and others who began to physically transition but then decided to stop or reverse the process. Soh explains that while access to gender-altering hormone treatments on adolescents is increasingly common and considered a right by some, their long-term effects are still largely unknown.

Throughout the book, Soh names

studies, cites her sources, and discusses the strengths and the flaws in these studies. She also, on multiple occasions, describes the backlash that has occurred when many of these studies were released and the attempts to suppress and silence the researchers who conducted them. When one is done reading this book, there will be little doubt that in our society today, issues surrounding sex, gender, and gender identity are often not being looked at and discussed scientifically. As a result, children and public policy are being adversely affected.

It's a powerful, important book. Because such beliefs tend to be embraced by intellectuals at the liberal/progressive/left end of the political and societal spectrums, they tend to be most criticized by people at the opposite, more conservative ends of the spectrums. Like many scientists who study human sexuality and related issues, Soh has always been more comfortable with progressive

and liberal views of sexual diversity and supports LGBTQ rights. However, progressives and liberals are more likely to attack her work. She spends much time discussing how many sex researchers, once their research leads them away from being accepted by the progressive/liberal end of the political spectrum, soon find themselves being widely cited and reported on by publications and people they have traditionally seen as adversaries.

Remember how I said that Soh is a frequent interview subject on YouTube videos? A surprising number come from what would be seen as right-wing sources. Although Soh does not draw the comparison, I was reminded of how memory researchers were treated when they began studying and disproving notions of repressed and recoverable memories of hidden trauma. They found themselves shunned by former ideological allies. They were instead desired speakers by people and organizations they would once have avoided.

For this reason, Soh spends a great deal of time discussing how much she has enjoyed her contact and time among the LGBTQ community and her large number of gay friends. She also believes in people's right to sexual experimentation and accepts that some people are indeed transgender. She thinks there is value in many cases of gender-reassignment surgery. Alas, while important, in my opinion, she does this too often. It becomes distracting and annoying and may even seem condescending to some readers.

While not perfect, Debra Soh's *The End of Gender* is an informative, highly readable book that packs in a great deal of information on both science and the way scientific research and researchers are attacked when their results are not what some people wish to hear. Despite occasionally irksome passages, I recommend it highly. ■

Peter Huston has been a contributor to this magazine since 1992. He is author of several books, including three on skepticism. His website is [www.HamchuckWC.com](http://www.HamchuckWC.com).

