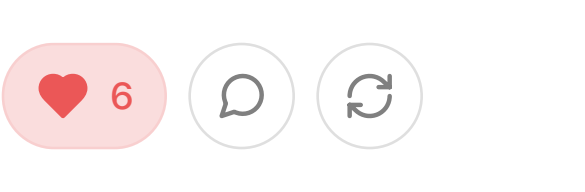
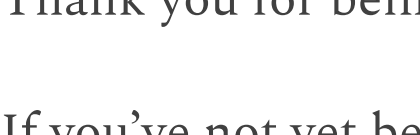


Gender Identity: The Movie

In a speech I gave recently I tried to imagine the story of gender identity as a feature release documentary. It's certainly got a cast of baddies ...from a suicidal philosopher to an Ayatollah.



MALCOLM RICHARD CLARK
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What do you get? Unique research I hope. I think I may have been the first journalist....to drill down into the anthropological research that Peter Tatchell cited in his famous pro-paedophilia letter to the Guardian.

In this post I talk more about what may be another discovery of mine: the direct link between the reactionary work of the anti-semitic philosopher Otto Weininger and the birth of gender ideology.

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A nice group of guys recently invited me to give a speech. *Male Allies Against Sexism* asked me to speak about anything I wanted, so naturally I talked about what has become my pet subject. If they ever bring back *Mastermind* gender identity will be my Specialist Round. I'll post the video of my speech at the end. If you come down with COVID over Christmas or a flight gets delayed at least it will fill an hour of your time.

Writing the speech got me thinking though about how best to reshape the narrative that's been spun to the public by the trans lobby about *gender identity*. If we lived in an entirely rational world the threat this notion poses to women's rights and children's mental health would help swing the argument on their own. Unfortunately, we don't live in a world that is entirely rational. Or fair. We're also up against the fact the trans lobby has had plenty of time to establish an origins story that has the memorable and captivating simplicity of myth. Or Marvel movies, those mythic tales of our modern culture.

In the lobby's telling a tiny, vulnerable minority were so special they were revered by ancient societies. All hail the two spirits. This utopia of gender-bending was then destroyed by nasty, brutish 'cisgender' capitalism which feared the very special people's very special powers so much they erased them from history and oppressed them at every turn, even denying the sacred right of men to wear fishnet tights and call themselves Millicent.

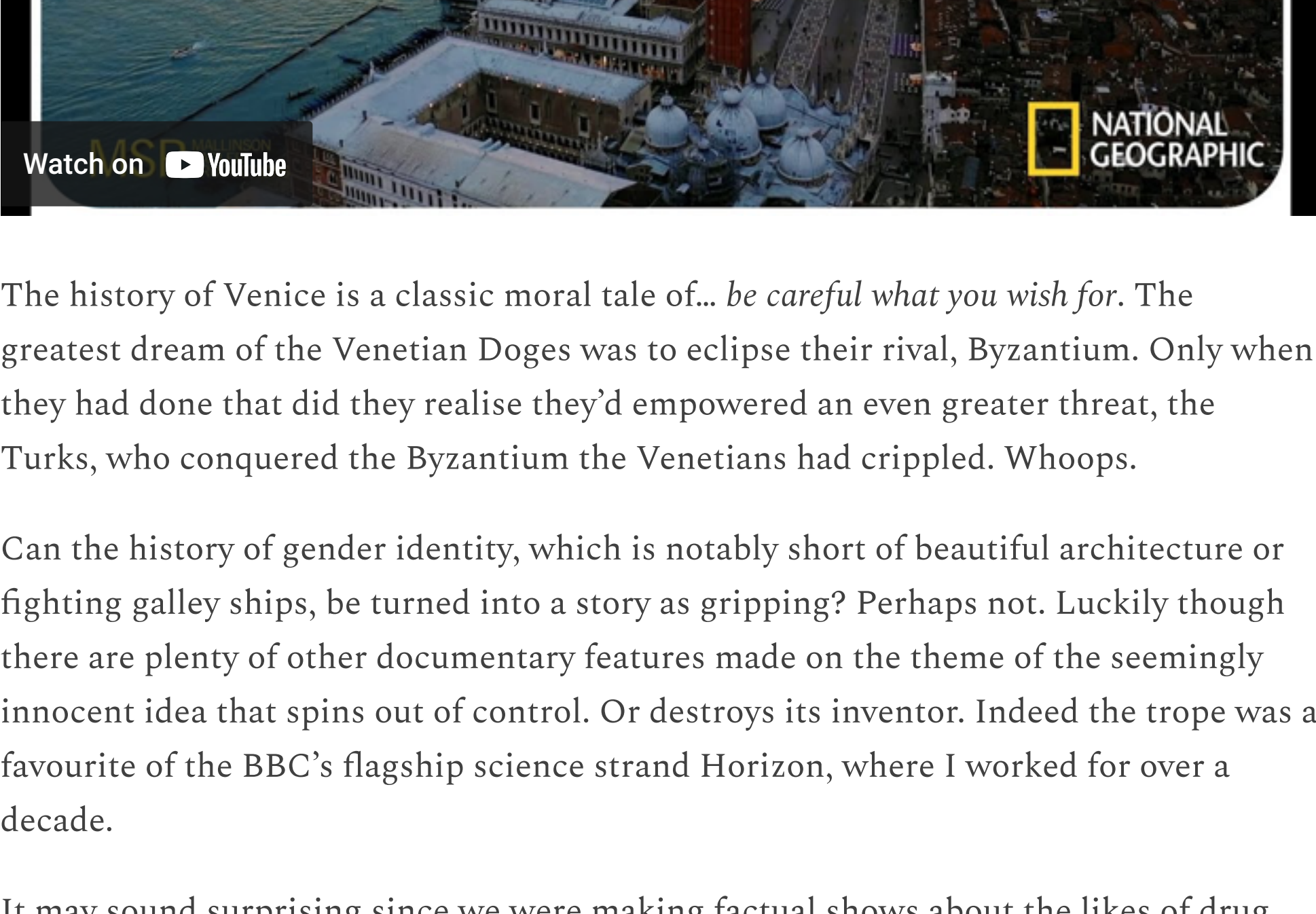
The myth ends by declaring that we can only make up for this historic evil if today we agree to treat the very special people as very, very special indeed. Only then can anyone be truly free, including Palestine which is patiently waiting to become its own best queer self.

Of course there is a very different history to be told. The real one. But if it is to compete with the magical morality tale told by the trans lobby the alternative will have to be just as compelling and equally capable of being turned into a movie too.

Complete with an elevator pitch.

The rise and spread of a bizarre idea may not seem like it can be turned into an accessible or frankly very interesting feature release but there is a whole factual genre of these kind of stories. Let's call the category the Sorcerer's Apprentice. In these stories a mysterious idea, invention or power is discovered that to its first devotees appears to solve magically all manner of problems. It is only as more and more people embrace the new idea that its dark side emerges.

As it turns out most of my television documentaries have been a variant on this theme. And some of them were interesting. Honest. Here's the trailer for one of the last ones I made before being effectively blackballed for alleged *bigotry*.



The history of Venice is a classic moral tale of... *be careful what you wish for*. The greatest dream of the Venetian Doges was to eclipse their rival, Byzantium. Only when they had done that did they realise they'd empowered an even greater threat, the Turks, who conquered the Byzantium the Venetians had crippled. Whoops.

Can the history of gender identity, which is notably short of beautiful architecture or fighting galley ships, be turned into a story as gripping? Perhaps not. Luckily though there are plenty of other documentary features made on the theme of the seemingly innocent idea that spins out of control. Or destroys its inventor. Indeed the trope was a favourite of the BBC's flagship science strand *Horizon*, where I worked for over a decade.

It may sound surprising since we were making factual shows about the likes of drug discoveries, natural disasters or dinosaurs but every story we told was deliberately constructed with the narrative scaffolding that Hollywood utilises and which our culture has inherited from ancient myth, including the reliable DNA of good story-telling, the Three Act or Five Act structure. When I presented a possible story to my Editor one of her many ways of saying no was to say, "It has no Second Act," or "the Third Act is just a twist in the tale".

What would a feature about gender identity require? Most classic myths and movies feature a protagonist who sets out on a life-changing mission to find a great treasure such as a Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail, the Water of Life, Excalibur.

Those quests begin with an inciting incident. In the Oedipus myth it's when Laius, the King of Thebes is given a prophecy that his son will kill him. The young Oedipus is set out on a hill to die but is then saved by the servant and brought up as his own, only to bump into his father many years later.

The inciting incident of gender identity occurs in the early 1860s. After hundreds of years of small German states it has become clear that Bismarck intends to unify Germany under Prussian leadership. For the lawyer Karl Ulrichs there's just one problem with this.

While homosexuality isn't criminalised in the vast majority of German states, it is in Prussia. Ulrichs quest is to find a way to convince the Prussians and other Germans not to extend this criminalisation across the whole of newly unified Germany. He decides that can only be done by convincing people that being gay is not a bad thing. Or a choice. Unfortunately he has a challenge. The word homosexual has not yet been invented, never mind the word gay.

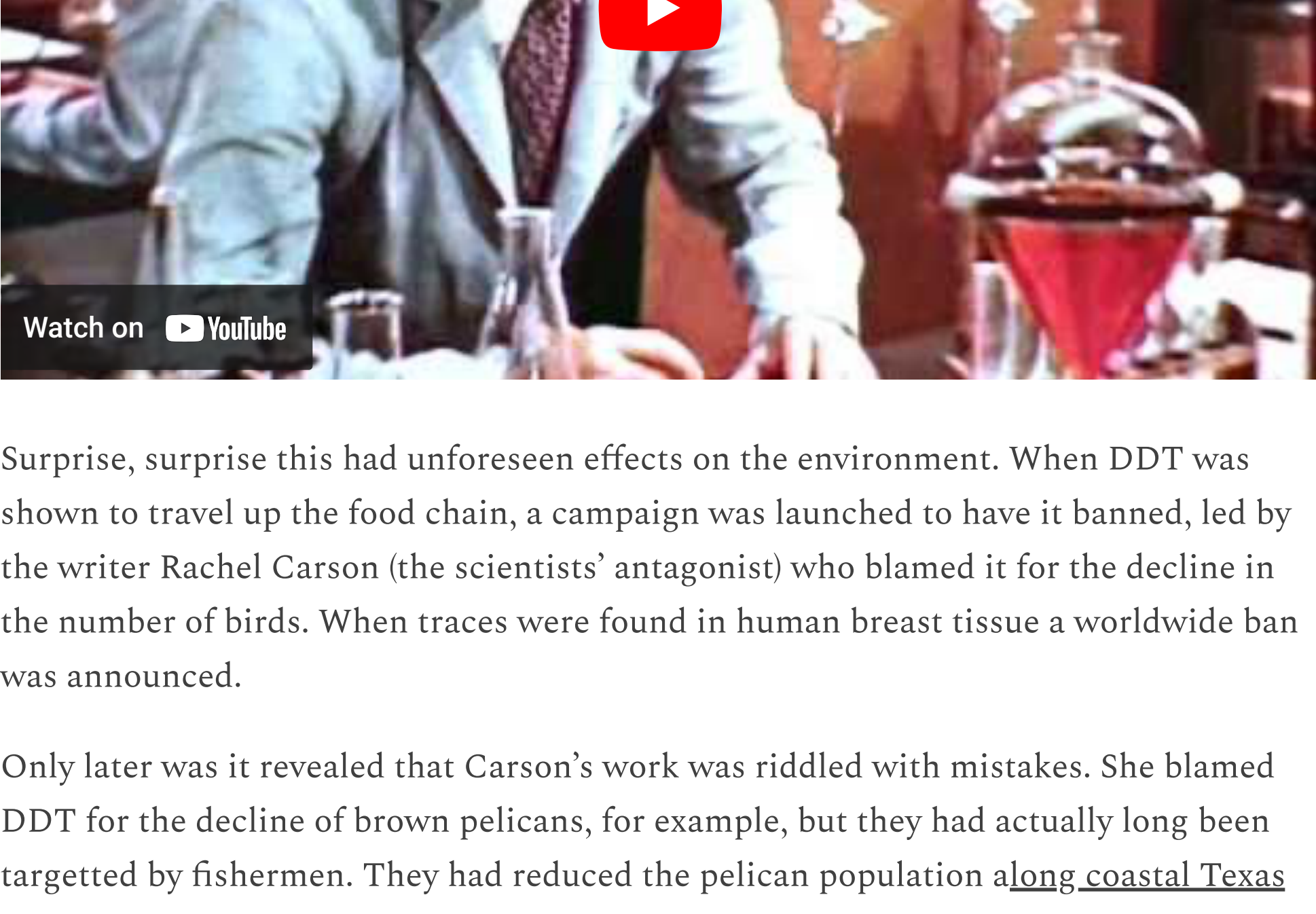
Ulrichs opens his own little etymological Pandora's Box and coins his own word, *Urnig*. Desperate to overcome the prejudice that maintains that people who have sex with others of the same sex are just lust-fuelled sinners and sodomites, Ulrichs begins to spin and, like Penelope, he just keeps spinning. Soon he has concocted a story about how Urnigs are not ordinary men or women. They are special and often a combination of both sexes, to differing degrees. Or even he speculateda female soul trapped in a male body or vice versa.

Ulrichs failed and Bismarck imposed criminalisation across the unified Germany. He was though trying to do a good thing even if he was a creature of his time. In a world where women had no rights, where sex stereotypes were brutally enforced and being a man and being a warrior were almost synonymous (this was ...Prussia remember) he thought his idea of female souls in male bodies was an alternative vision. In fact it was merely another expression of the rigid stereotypes and prejudice he was trying to escape. Femealeness was submissive and gentle. Maleness was aggression and being clever.

Gender identity would, as we know, turn out to be a disaster, but that was far from clear for a long time. And that's not so unusual. In the mid 1990s a series made by the renowned documentary director, Adam Curtis, with the appropriately mythological title of *Pandora's Box*, told the stories of other seemingly brilliant scientific or pseudo-scientific ideas and inventions that backfired.

A good example is Episode Four, '*Goodbye Mrs Ant*' about DDT. This relates how the scientific community (the protagonist) sought what seemed an impossible dream: a surefire way to destroy killer insects like mosquitoes.

The scientists knew the mosquito had killed more humans -by far- than any other animal so they were delighted when in 1939 they discovered DDT was the perfect insecticide, long-lasting, cheap as chips and very deadly to mosquitoes. It was also thought to be so safe to human beings it was promoted to skeptical communities by officials ...eating it. In this clip from a 1940s British short film a colonial administrator has DDT sprayed on his porridge and then swallows it. Yum yum. What can go wrong?



DDT saved millions of lives from malaria and typhus (a disease carried on ticks). Then came the hubris which is the hallmark of all science ideas gone wrong...and countless myths. DDT was so successful that after the war the chemical industry, politicians and public health officials advocated spraying it everywhere to control not just killer pests but even just slightly annoying ones, like ants. Inside your house. In the garden. In sports halls. Soon planes were spraying DDT over forests and lakes, and regularly.

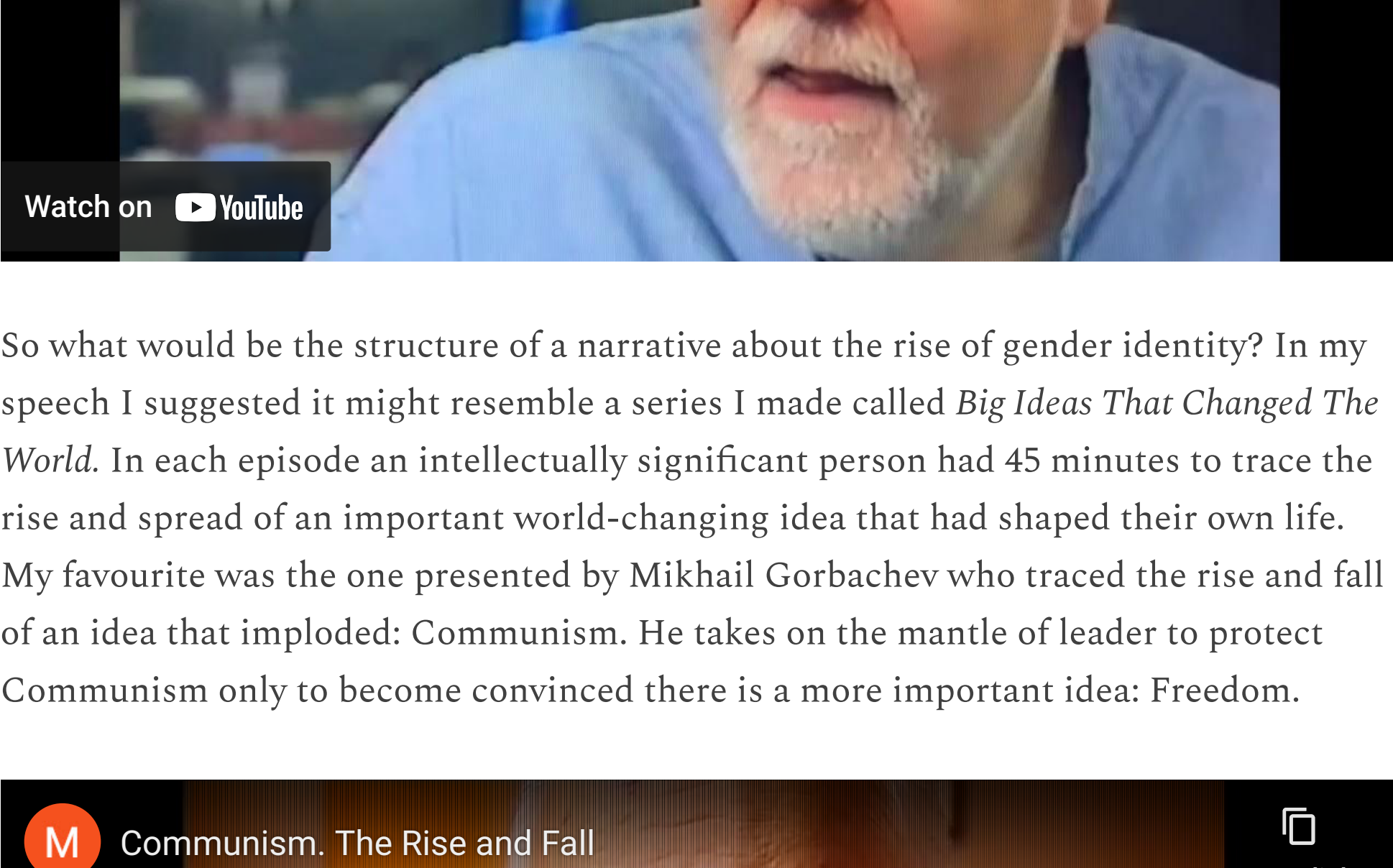


Surprise, surprise this had unforeseen effects on the environment. When DDT was shown to travel up the food chain, a campaign was launched to have it banned, led by the writer Rachel Carson (the scientists' antagonist) who blamed it for the decline in the number of birds. When traces were found in human breast tissue a worldwide ban was announced.

Only later was it revealed that Carson's work was riddled with mistakes. She blamed DDT for the decline of brown pelicans, for example, but they had actually long been targetted by fishermen. They had reduced the pelican population along coastal Texas from 5,000 annual births in the 1920s to just 200 in 1941. And anyway spraying waterways didn't start until after WW2.

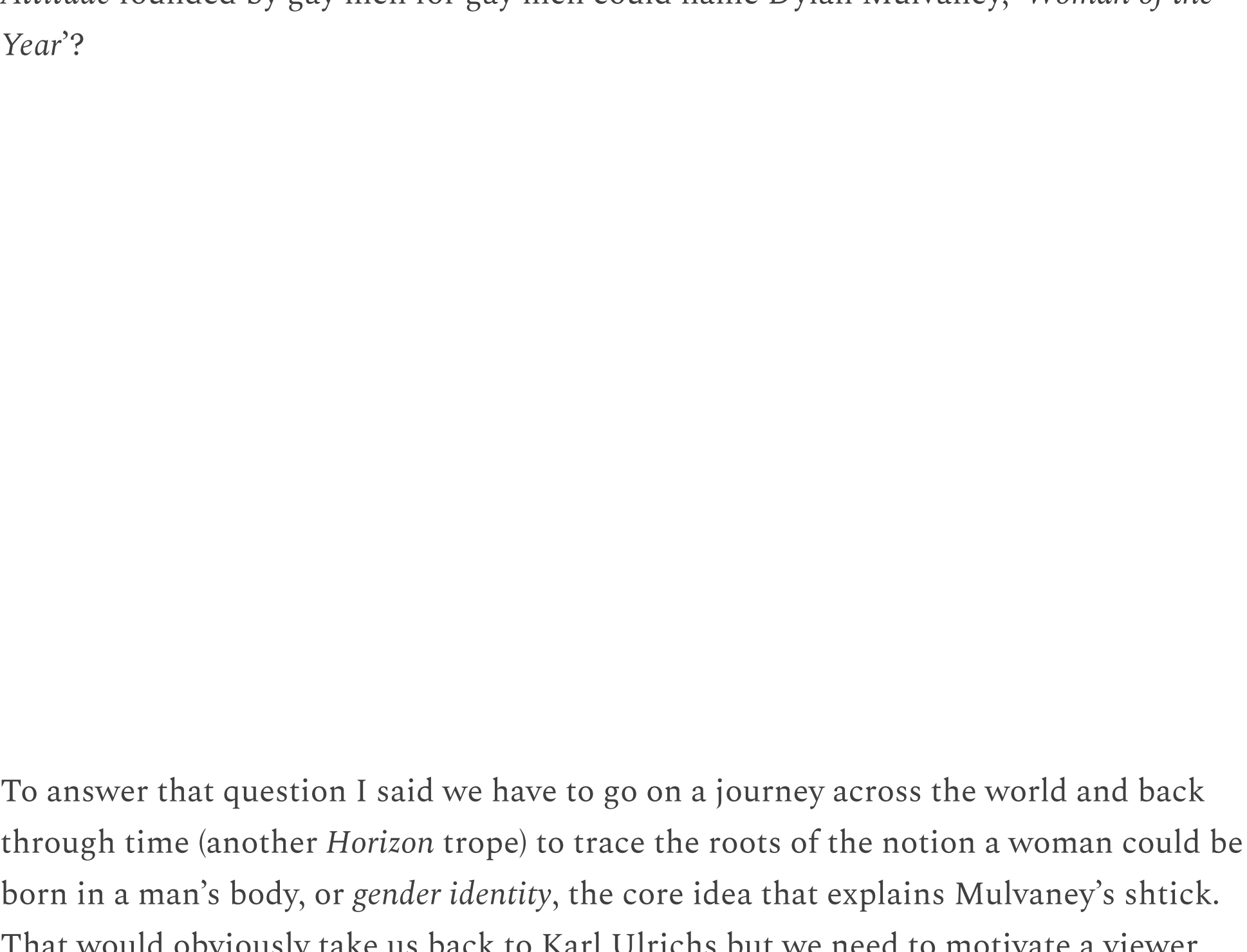
The ban on DDT also backfired. Poorer countries could not afford new and more expensive insecticides and cases of malaria, dengue fever and other mosquito-borne diseases quickly rebounded (though new strategies have begun to reverse that, after 30 years of struggle). The final moral of Curtis's story was that a scientific treasure -of sorts- had been ruthlessly exploited for greed, turning it from a beneficence into a curse.

You can watch the show yourself here.

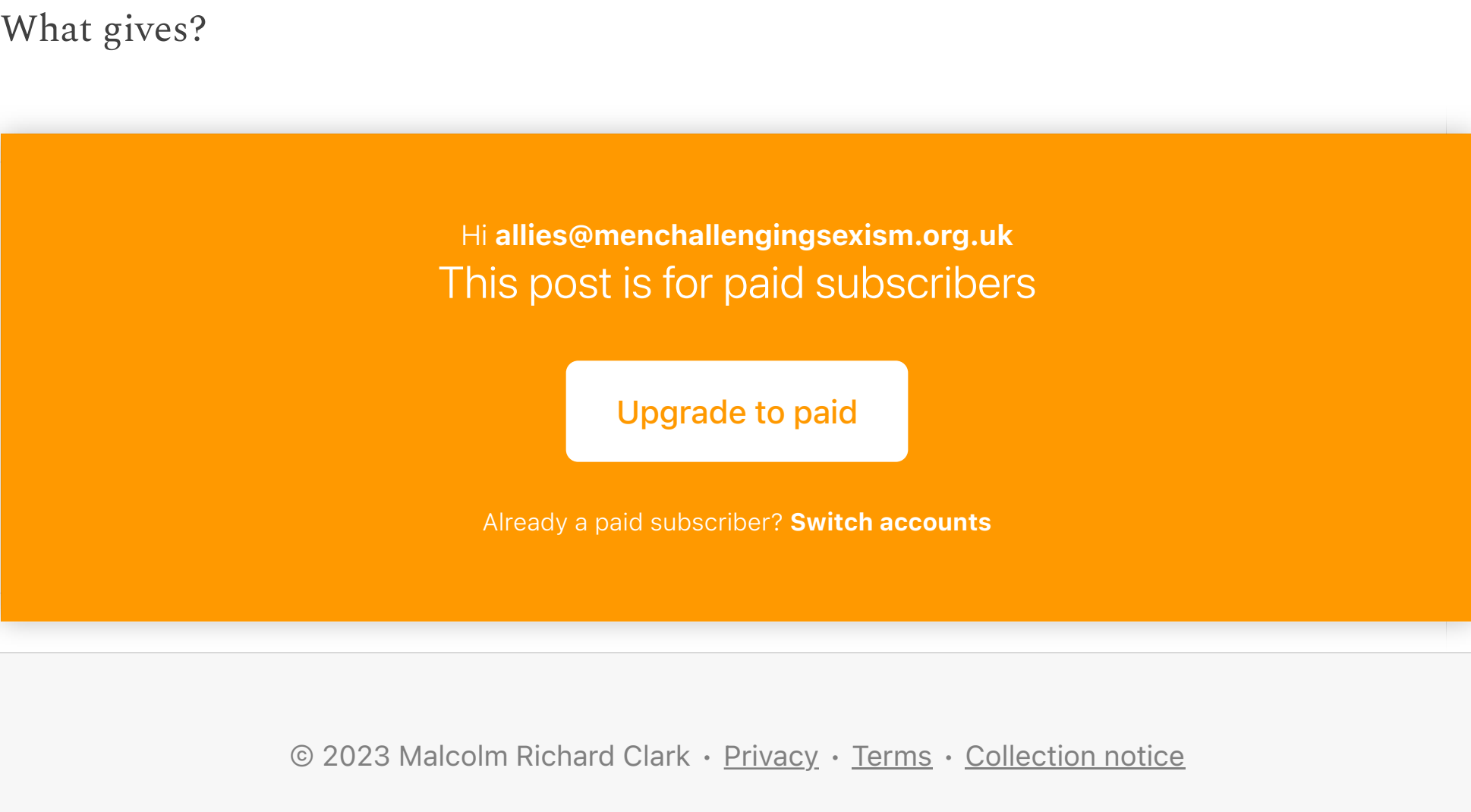


I told the story of another great discovery with the power for good that was misused in a *Horizon* about, of all things, a mathematical equation. '*The Midas Formula*' (more mythic references) told the story of two high-flying economists who transformed the financial markets with an equation that allowed risks to be offset. In 1997 they won the Nobel Prize for their discovery. By then they had amassed a vast fortune from a hedge fund they helped set up which used trading strategies reliant on their equation. You can guess what happened next. Utterly confident that they could offset all their risks they took on ever-bigger positions. Just a year after their Nobel Prize their hedge fund collapsed in the biggest modern financial disaster....until that of 2008/9.

Whom the gods wish to destroy...



So what would be the structure of a narrative about the rise of gender identity? My speech I suggested it might resemble a series I made called *Big Ideas That Changed The World*. In each episode an intellectually significant person had 45 minutes to trace the rise and spread of an important world-changing idea that had shaped their own life. My favourite was the one presented by Mikhail Gorbachev who traced the rise and fall of an idea that implied: Communism. He takes on the mantle of leader to protect Communism only to become convinced there is a more important idea: Freedom.



In my speech I started with a favourite device of many a BBC *Horizon*....a provocative question. How on earth I asked did we arrive at the stage where a magazine like *Attitude* founded by gay men for gay men could name Dylan Mulvaney, '*Woman of the Year*'?

To answer that question I said we have to go on a journey across the world and back through time (another *Horizon* trope) to trace the roots of the notion a woman could be born in a man's body, or *gender identity*, the core idea that needs Mulvaney's shtick. That would obviously take us back to Karl Ulrichs but we explain to motivate a viewer who may not be convinced Dylan is such a bad person to come on the journey with us. To do that we need to surprise and intrigue them, and make them want to know more.

To much of the political Left, soggy Centre and even neo-liberal freemarketeers the Mulvaney cover is merely a welcome emblem of liberal progress. The idea of gender identity is viewed as the inheritor of the values of the Civil Rights struggle, feminism and the gay rights movement.

And yet...

There is a mystery about this idea its advocates have chosen to ignore. One that hints at a darker side. That mystery is how one of the first nations to embrace such an allegedly progressive idea could have been ...the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the most misogynistic and homophobic nations on Earth.

What gives?

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