

© Catherine Opie/ Fitzcarraldo Editions

Gender politics Add to myFT

Punk philosopher Paul B Preciado on the true meaning of 'dysphoria'

In a quiet Parisian square, the radical writer proposes a new way of understanding the world

Tom Faber

Published AUG 1 2025

I've come to Paris to meet a rock star. Not a musician like Lenny Kravitz, often spotted wandering the narrow streets of the Marais, but a writer — a rock star in the rarefied world of philosophy. Paul B Preciado's provocative work vigorously tests the boundaries of what critical theory can look like. The book that put him on the map, 2008's *Testo Junkie*, balanced a rigorous academic analysis of the history of gender, sexuality and medicine with reflections on Preciado's own experience of gender transition and — most startlingly — graphic scenes from his intimate life. In the opening pages alone, there is a passage in which Preciado rubs testosterone gel on his skin, shaves his pubic hair and employs three separate dildos in an unconventional funerary ritual that he records on video.

His career since has included more books, a prizewinning experimental documentary called *Orlando: My Political Biography* based on Virginia Woolf's gender-bending 1928 novel, being named among the 25 most influential people in the contemporary art world by ArtReview magazine and giving a speech at a French psychoanalytic society so transgressive that Preciado was aggressively heckled and yanked offstage long before he'd finished (the full text was published as *Can the Monster Speak?*).

Given his punk theorist credentials, you might forgive me for expecting Preciado to cut a bold figure on this sweltering day in a quiet square at the top of Belleville, a steeply pitched neighbourhood in the north-east of Paris. Perhaps some edgy piercings, neon-dyed hair, at the very least a chunky boot. Instead, strolling up to our meeting 10 minutes early, Preciado, 54, nails the chic, understated assignment implied by every Parisian street, turned out in a simple navy jacket, white T-shirt, trendy Nike trainers and dark Ray-Ban shades, which he does not remove.

As soon as we start talking, the Preciado I recognise from his writing emerges. He speaks in essays: long, winding answers dense with theoretical language, punctuated by references to culture, both low and high, arresting analogies and a generous supply of witty quips.

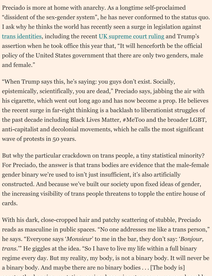
He's come to discuss his latest book, *Dysphoria Mundi*, which was first published in 2022 in his native Spanish (Preciado grew up in Burgos, northern Spain) and in English translation earlier this year. The premise of the book — though given its kaleidoscopic nature and frequently incandescent, poetic style, there is nothing as straightforward as a simple argument here — is that society is undergoing an "epistemic shift", a widespread change in our understanding of the world, dramatically accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I had the sense that we needed a new collective narrative about what was happening," he tells me. The new framework Preciado offers for understanding the world comes from the idea of "dysphoria", a term adopted by psychiatrists relatively recently to describe a state of intense unhappiness or discomfort. It is usually invoked within the context of "gender dysphoria" to explain the emotional experiences of those who do not relate to the gender they were assigned at birth — a group that includes Preciado himself, who started his career writing under his birth name, Beatriz, before beginning his transition and, in 2014, adopting the name Paul.

Preciado believes that the concept of dysphoria might be expanded to describe the way society tries to "normalise" anyone who doesn't conform by pathologising their differences. "If you're reluctant to be in a relationship or have a family, to have phone conversations or use social media, if you don't want to earn money — these things are reduced to psychological symptoms which should be treated," he says. "What happens if we look at them instead as political forms of resistance?"

Deep down, he argues, everyone feels that they don't satisfy social expectations in some sense. So we might reappropriate dysphoria as a political term and argue: if I feel I don't fit in, perhaps it's not a sign that there's something wrong with me, but with the system.

Preciado's writing is quintessentially revolutionary, building upon the work of feminist writers, queer activists and 20th-century theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. (Preciado studied philosophy in New York under Derrida, who later invited him to teach a seminar in Paris.) Pitched between theory, poetry, memoir and activism, his work can be variously inspiring, baffling, exhausting, humorous, enraging and sometimes beautiful. It's not always clear how the revolution is supposed to come, but there's something undeniably captivating about the whole project.



Paul B Preciado takes part in a Q&A following a screening of "Orlando, My Political Biography" during the 61st New York Film Festival © Michael Loccisano/Getty Images for FLC

But how does his dysphoria idea actually help the average, gender-conforming person? Why should they care? When I ask this, Preciado pauses for a moment, thinking, I watch him and wonder if there was ever a more Platonic ideal of a Parisian philosopher: the Perrier sparkling water, the dense heights of theory, the Eiffel Tower winking in the distance over his shoulder. Then he one-ups himself by pulling a pack of slim Vogue cigarettes from his pocket, lighting one and exhaling thoughtfully.

"I wonder who really does fit within this regime, and at what cost? At the end, who is benefiting from us being adjusted to that regime?" he asks. "Instead of saying: 'Oh what can we do with people that don't fit?' we might say: 'What can we do with all the energy that you use to make things fit within a regime that is artificial — fully constructed."

For Preciado, patriarchal, colonial and capitalist ideologies are destructive "social technologies" that have become so dominant that we can no longer see there are feasible alternatives. Every week seems to bring a fresh dispatch from the frontline of the apocalypse — climate change, political polarisation, resurgent Nazi and fascist movements, the threat of AI, all-out war in both Europe and the Middle East. It doesn't take a philosopher to see that the status quo is leading us precipitously towards a global, multipronged cataclysm.

At this moment, there's an explosion behind me. Wheeling round, I see that a group of kids, no older than 12, have somehow released a torrent of water from the gutter, sending an enormous plume spraying magnificently into the sky, sparkling in the sunlight, like something from a Spike Lee movie. They dare each other to jump into their improvised fountain, whipping with joy. Preciado breaks his flow and smiles. "That's very funny," he says softly. "It's beautiful."

For Preciado there is no separation between highfalutin critical theory and street life. "It's interesting that we're seeing this water," he riffs. "I'm thinking about the way water has been privatised by the state and companies and channelled into tubes that go underneath the city. But nevertheless, if you open it up, it immediately overflows and can create other areas of life, of play."

Before long, there's a regime change at the fountain. A boy with dark curly hair and a blue football shirt has taken charge, standing over the spray and spreading his arms out like Christ, before directing the flow of water at oncoming cars. "He has become the water police now," Preciado says with a smirk. The other kids get bored and shuffle off to sit on a bench. It scans like a political parable, from joyful anarchy to a gloomy authoritarian dictatorship.

Preciado is more at home with anarchy. As a longtime self-proclaimed "dissident of the sex-gender system", he has never conformed to the status quo. I ask why he thinks the world has recently seen a surge in legislation against trans identities, including the recent UK supreme court ruling and Trump's assertion when he took office this year that, "It will henceforth be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders, male and female."

"When Trump says this, he's saying: 'you guys don't exist. Socially, epistemically, scientifically, you are dead,'" Preciado says, jabbing the air with his cigarette, which went out long ago and has now become a prop. He believes the recent surge in far-right thinking is a backlash to liberationist struggles of the past decade including Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the broader LGBT, anti-capitalist and decolonial movements, which he calls the most significant wave of protests in 50 years.

But why the particular crackdown on trans people, a tiny statistical minority? For Preciado, the answer is that trans bodies are evidence that the male-female gender binary we're used to isn't just insufficient, it's also artificially constructed. And because we've built our society upon fixed ideas of gender, the increasing visibility of trans people threatens to topple the entire house of cards.

With his dark, close-cropped hair and patchy scattering of stubble, Preciado reads as masculine in public spaces. "No one addresses me like a trans person," he says. "Everyone says '*Monsieur*' to me in the bar, they don't say: '*Bonjour, trans.*'" He giggles at the idea. "So I have to live my life within a full binary regime every day. But my reality, my body, is not a binary body. It will never be a binary body. And maybe there are no binary bodies . . . [The body is] constantly changing, mutating, ageing, becoming stronger or more vulnerable. All these changes. So maybe that's what we're fighting for now." Its gestural possibilities exhausted, he lays his cigarette butt in the ashtray.

We say our goodbyes and Preciado ambles off the same way he came a few hours earlier. The sun hangs low in the sky, yet the heat is still powerful. The group of boys have dispersed, but the water continues to gush out into the street, liberated from its pipes. It gleams in the light and races down the hillside, with nobody to control it or stem its flow.

"Dysphoria Mundi" is published by Fitzcarraldo Editions

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend Magazine on X and FT Weekend on Instagram

Follow the topics in this article

Gender politics Add to myFT
Life & Arts Added
LGBT+ Add to myFT
Philosophy Add to myFT
Tom Faber Added

IN PERSON & ONLINE
FT Weekend Festival
Experience the FT come to life
SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER
UNITED KINGDOM & ONLINE
Presented by FT LIVE

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.
Reuse this content Comments

Latest on Gender politics



Laura Bates
The Gloria Steinem I knew



Soumaya Keynes
The perks of parenting by spreadsheet



UK politics
Gender divides emerge as big factor in Burnham by-election



The Weekend Essay
How tech turned against women



Jemima Kelly
Is praise of male courage



Najmah Bozorgmehr
The argument Iranians have in private



UK business
Reeves warns of lost opportunities if UK's female founders are overlooked



FT Wealth
Female watch collectors carve out a space for themselves

Comments

Comments have not been enabled for this article.

Markets data delayed by at least 15 minutes. © THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2026. FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.
The Financial Times and its journalism are subject to a self-regulation regime under the FT Editorial Code of Practice.