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A Conversation with Anne Fausto-Sterling

Exploring What Makes Us Male or Female

by Claudia Dreifus. Copyright © New York Times January 2, 2001 

Article appeared in Polare magazine: May 2001 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



My political point is that we can afford to lighten up about what it means to be male or female. We should definitely lighten up on those who fall in between because there are a lot of them.

Providence, Rhode Island U.S.A. - On a recent frozen winter evening, Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling, fifty-six, a professor of biology and women's studies at Brown, sat in a restaurant here, nibbling on a light snack and talking about her favourite subject: the application of ideas about gender roles to the formal study of biology.

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In the academic world, Dr. Fausto-Sterling is known as a developmental biologist who offers interesting counterpoints to the view that the role division between men and women is largely pre-determined by evolution.

"When people say 'it's nurture' or 'it's nature' in making us male or female, I take the middle ground and say that it's a combination of both," she said. "That's not a popular position to take in today's academic environment, but it is the one that makes the most sense."

Her 1985 book, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*, is used in women's studies courses throughout the country. Dr. Fausto-Sterling's newest work, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, is a look at societal ideas about gender as seen through the eyes of human beings defined as neither male or female - intersex.

Until 1980, she studied the role of genes in the embryological development of fruit flies. More recently, she has investigated the developmental ecology of flatworms.

New York Times: What can we learn about gender from examining how the medical profession treats infants born with ambiguous genitalia? These are children who were once called 'hermaphrodites', and whom you would prefer we term 'intersex'.

Anne Fausto-Sterling: From them, we can literally see how society's ideas about male and female are constructed. When infants with ambiguous genitalia are born, everyone - parents, doctors - are very upset and the physicians often suggest drastic surgeries to assign a specific gender to the child. The regimen usually involves the doctors' deciding what sex the child ought to be. Then, they surgically reconstruct the patient to conform to that diagnosis: body parts are taken out, others are added, hormones are given, or taken away.

In the end, the doctors take a body that was clearly neither male or female and turn it into one they can represent to the world as 'male' or 'female'.

New York Times: How did the fate of intersex children become your passion?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: In the early 1990s, I began looking into this because I was interested in a theoretical question that was circulating around feminist studies at that time; I wanted to know, what is meant when we say, "the body is a social construction?" At the time, social-scientists were looking into how our ideas about the human body were shaped by politics and culture. That inquiry led me to a lot of the medical literature on intersex.

New York Times: How many people do you estimate are born intersex?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: It depends on how you count. Working with Brown undergraduates, I did some research and we found that maybe 1½ to 2 percent of all births do not fall strictly within the tight definition of all-male or all-female, even if the child looks that way. Beyond having a mixed set of genitals, you could have an individual with an extra Y chromosome.

He'd still look like a standard male, but he'd have this extra chromosome. Or you could have someone who was XO, a female with under-developed ovaries, known medically as having Turner's Syndrome.

My point is that there's greater human variation than supposed. My political point is that we can afford to lighten up about what it means to be male or female. We should definitely lighten up on those who fall in between because there are a lot of them.

New York Times: You want a halt to sexual assignment surgeries on infants. Why?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: People deserve to have a choice about something as important as that. Infants can't make choices. And the doctors often guess wrong. They might say, "We think this infant should be a female because the sexual organ it has is small." Then, they go and remove the penis and the testes. Years later, the kid says, "I'm a boy, and that's what I want to be, and I don't want to take oestrogen, and by the way, give me back my penis."

I feel we should let the kids tell us what they think is right once they are old enough to know. Till then, parents can talk to the kids in a way that gives them permission to be different, they can give the child a gender neutral name, they can do a provisional gender assignment. Of course, there are some cases where infants are born with life-threatening malformations. In those rare situations, surgery is called for.

New York Times: In *Sexing the Body* you suggest that oestrogen and testosterone should not be termed sex hormones. You'd prefer we called them growth hormones. Why?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: The molecules we call sex hormones affect our liver, our muscles, our bones, virtually every tissue in the body. In addition to their roles in our reproductive system, they affect growth and development throughout life. So to think of them as growth hormones, which they are, is to stop worrying that men have a lot of testosterone and women, oestrogen.

New York Times: Among gay people, there is a tendency to embrace a genetic explanation of homosexuality. Why is that?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: It's a popular idea with gay men. Less so, with gay women. That may be because the genesis of homosexuality appears to be different for men than women. I think gay men also face a particularly difficult psychological situation because they are seen as embracing something hated in our culture - the feminine - and so they'd better come up with a good reason for what they are doing.

Gay women, on the other hand, are seen as, rightly or wrongly, embracing something our culture values highly - masculinity. Now that whole analysis that gay men are feminine and gay women are masculine, is itself open to big question, but it provides a cop-out and an area of relief. You know, "It's not my fault, you have to love me anyway."

It provides the disapproving relatives with an excuse: "It's not my fault, I didn't raise 'em wrong." It provides a legal argument that is, at the moment, actually having some sway in court. For me, it's a very shaky place. It's bad science and bad politics. It seems to me that the way we consider homosexuality in our culture is an ethical and a moral question.

The biology here is poorly understood. The best controlled studies performed to measure genetic contributions to homosexuality say that fifty percent of what goes into making a person homosexual is genetic. That means fifty percent is not. And while everyone is very excited about genes, we are clueless about the equally important non-genetic contributions.

New York Times: Why do you suppose lesbians have been less accepting than gay men about genetics as the explanation for homosexuality.

Anne Fausto-Sterling: I think most lesbians have more of a sense of the cultural component in making us who we are. If you look at many lesbians' life histories, you will often find extensive heterosexual experiences. They often feel they've made a choice. I also think lesbians face something that males don't - at the end of the day, they still have to be women in a world run by men. All of that makes them very conscious of complexity.

New York Times: How much of your thinking about sexual plasticity comes from your own life? You've been married. You are now in a committed relationship with the playwright Paula Vogel.

Anne Fausto-Sterling: My interest in gender issues preceded my own life changes. When I first got involved in feminism, I was married. The gender issues did to me what they did to lots of women in the 1970s: they infuriated me. My poor husband, who was a very decent guy, tried as hard as he could to be sympathetic. But he was shut out of what I was doing. The women's movement opened up the feminine in a way that was new to me, and so my involvement made possible my becoming a lesbian. My ex and I are still friends. He's re-married.

New York Times: So the anti-feminists are right: women's liberation is the first step toward lesbianism?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: (Laughs) It's true. I call myself a lesbian now because that is the life I am living, and I think it is something you should own up to. At the moment, I am in a happy relationship and I don't ever imagine changing it. Still, I don't think loving a man is unimaginable.

New York Times: What do you think nature is telling us by making intersex?

Anne Fausto-Sterling: That nature is not an ideal state. It is filled with imperfections and developmental variation. We have all these Aristotelian categories of male and female. Nature doesn't have them. Nature creates a whole lot of different forms.

Anne Fausto-Sterling



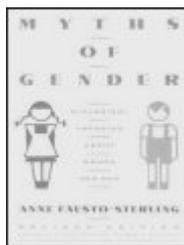
From Wikipedia: Anne Fausto-Sterling, Ph.D. is Professor of Biology and Gender Studies at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island U.S.A. She participates actively in the field of sexology and has written extensively on the fields of biology of gender, sexual-identity, gender-identity, and gender-roles.



She has written two books intended for the general audience. The second edition of the first of those books, *Myths of Gender*, was published in 1992. Her second book for the general public is *Sexing the Body*, published in 2000. She stated that in it she sets out to "convince readers of the need for theories that allow for a good deal of human variation and that integrate the analytical powers of the biological and the social into the systematic analysis of human-development."

In a paper entitled *The Five Sexes*, in which, according to her, "I had intended to be provocative, but I had also written with tongue firmly in cheek", Fausto-Sterling laid out a thought experiment considering an alternative model of gender containing five sexes: male, female, merm, ferm, and herm. This thought experiment was interpreted by some as a serious proposal or even a theory; advocates for intersex people stated that this theory was wrong, confusing and unhelpful to the interests of intersex people. In a later paper ("The Five Sexes, Revisited") she has acknowledged these objections.

Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling: New Ways of Thinking about Science and Human Difference



Myths of Gender: biological theories about women and men.
Author: Anne Fausto-Sterling
Publisher: Basic Books, (1992)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0465047925

From Amazon Books: By carefully examining the biological, genetic, evolutionary, and psychological evidence, a noted biologist finds a shocking lack of substance behind ideas about biologically based sex differences. Features a new chapter and afterward on recent biological breakthroughs.



Sexing the Body: gender politics and the construction of sexuality
Author: Anne Fausto-Sterling
Publisher: Basic Books, (2000)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0465077144

From Amazon Books: Why do some people prefer heterosexual love while others fancy the same sex? Is sexual-identity biologically determined or a product of convention? In this brilliant and provocative book, the acclaimed author of *Myths of Gender* argues that even the most fundamental knowledge about sex is shaped by the culture in which scientific knowledge is produced. Drawing on astonishing real-life cases and a probing analysis of centuries of scientific research, Fausto-Sterling demonstrates how scientists have historically politicized the body. In lively and impassioned prose, she breaks down three key dualisms - sex/gender, nature/nurture, and real/constructed - and asserts that individuals born as mixtures of male and female exist as one of five natural human variants and, as such, should not be forced to compromise their differences to fit a flawed societal definition of normality.



Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World
Author: Anne Fausto-Sterling
Publisher: Routledge (2012)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 0415881456

From Amazon Books: *Sex/Gender* presents a relatively new way to think about how biological difference can be produced over time in response to different environmental and social experiences. This book gives a clearly written explanation of the biological and cultural underpinnings of gender. Anne Fausto-Sterling provides an introduction to the biochemistry, neurobiology, and social construction of gender with expertise and humour in a style accessible to a wide variety of readers.

In addition to the basics, *Sex/Gender* ponders the moral, ethical, social and political side to this inescapable subject.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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