

Book Review

Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality by Anne Fausto-Sterling

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Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality by renowned biologist and feminist Anne Fausto-Sterling is a brilliant introduction to the question of how human sexuality developed and how social concepts of sexuality have influenced biological understandings. Through examining the latest biological research in the area of sexuality, Fausto-Sterling makes the point that our notion of a male-female dichotomy is not necessarily supported by science, but rather, that the science of sexuality has been colored by socially-constructed assumptions. In making this point, the author hopes to offer a more balanced view of human sexuality than has been presented before.

Although the book was written mainly for a general audience, and is quite readable without sacrificing scholarly rigor, it is also very useful for feminist theorists and social scientists (including political scientists), many of whom have long preferred using the sociological term “gender” rather than the biological term “sex” since the former term emphasizes the importance of social and environmental factors as opposed to physical and biological factors in shaping human sexuality and inter-sex relations. The book provides the reader with a thorough and systematic review of the results of the past biological research on sex and sexuality with the goal of broadening the reader’s outlook on the question of human sexuality, and employs this systematic review to develop a socio-cultural understanding of sexuality.

The author starts her discussion by challenging the dualism so ingrained into our everyday thinking; of particular importance here are the dualisms between male (masculinity) and female (femininity), between mind and body, between nature (biological) and human (social), and even between sex and gender. It is the author’s main argument that we need to go beyond these dualisms and adopt a more integrated ap-

proach (the developmental systems theory, in particular), in order to fully understand human sexuality.

What challenges the dualism of male and female most vividly is the existence of intersexuals (formerly called “hermaphrodites”). According to the author, these biological outliers that do not perfectly fit the male-female dichotomy have existed in varying forms throughout the history of mankind. Until recently, they had been only partially accepted, and largely denied, ridiculed, or surgically repaired to fit in. Nowadays, however, they have formed political organizations, fighting to protect their natural and legal rights. The author pleads that we end the tyranny of the two-sex (gender) system and adopt a more flexible concept of sex and gender, which would allow for a greater tolerance of multiplicity and ambiguity.

In order to demonstrate how the socially constructed concept of the two-sex system has influenced previous biological research, the author introduces the results of major biological studies in the fields of brain and hormone research. According to her, many of these studies were premised, whether explicitly or implicitly, on the assumption that there are (and should be) only two sexes. Challenging this basic premise, the author shows us how the previous research results could be reinterpreted.

For example, sex hormones, whose existence and sexually distinctive functions most of us take for granted as scientifically verified facts, might be simply an artifact of our social notion of sex and gender. In fact, it has been clearly demonstrated that these hormones perform many non-sexual and sexually ambiguous functions in the human body. For this reason, the author argues that the time has come to abandon the organizing metaphor of the sex hormone and the specific terms “androgen” and “estrogen,” and to use the term “steroid hormones” instead. This widening of our scientific vision would change our understanding of sex and gender. However, such changes can occur only as our social notions of sex and gender change. Once again, we are faced with the indivisibility of science and society, and, more generally, of nature and humanity.

The most fascinating findings and suggestions in this book come from the chapter that examines the results of experimental studies on animal sexual behavior. Among many interesting findings, the most

striking and stimulating is that by Frank Ambrose Beach. He has found through his experiments on rodents not only that there exists a great diversity of sexual behavior within each sex, but also that both male and female rats display, under some conditions, both typically masculine (mounting) and feminine (lordosis) mating behavior, strongly suggesting bisexuality. In short, males and females differed quantitatively but not qualitatively.

What can be inferred from this finding is that an orthogonal model, as opposed to a linear model, is more descriptive of masculinity and femininity in rodents. According to the traditional linear model, masculinity and femininity were graded, mutually exclusive responses. The more feminine a rodent, the less masculine she/he had to be. The new orthogonal model suggests, however, that masculinity and femininity may not be mutually exclusive responses and they may vary independently of each other. The same animal could be both highly masculine and highly feminine, highly feminine but not at all masculine, highly masculine but not at all feminine, or might score low on both scales.

Extending this finding on rodent sexual behavior to human sexual behavior involves making a risky leap; but if one takes the risk, and applies the orthogonal model to humans, one could explain a great deal of sexual behavior previously unaccounted for. From this wider and more flexible point of view, it is not so difficult to understand the occurrence of homosexuality, bisexuality, trans-sexuality, and even intersexuality. It might be that we observe these types of non-heterosexual behaviors less frequently in humans than in other animals simply because we humans are under more severe social pressure to conform to the social norm.

This book ends by discussing the possibility of a theory of human sexuality that takes a more comprehensive and integrated approach by considering body (biology and nature) and culture (social-political, nurture) in a systematic fashion. The author argues convincingly that the human body and human society are so intertwined that we cannot separate one from the other. The two have continually affected each other in the process of developing human sexuality, and the familiar scientific practice of examining only one while holding the other constant does not serve well here.

The author is uniquely equipped to make her argument. As a feminist, she fully understands the political nature of biology, and as a biologist, she can explain, evaluate, and integrate the relevant biological research. As a political scientist, I could not agree more with her view. After all, everything is political. As a renowned feminist theorist has already observed, biology is simply politics by other means. This book is an excellent demonstration of that claim.

Biographical Note: **Wook Kim** received a Ph. D. in political science from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA. He is currently teaching at Paichai University in South Korea. His major research interest lies in South Korea's domestic political process, and in electoral politics in particular; but he also has a great deal of interest in feminism and the politics of sexuality.
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Anne Fausto-Sterling. Basic Books, Feb 10, 2000 - Psychology - 496 pages. 1 Review. Why do some people prefer heterosexual love while others fancy the same sex? Is sexual identity biologically determined or a product of convention? There's a lot going on in this book - a history of the science of sex and gender, an analysis of how social expectations shaped and continue to shape that research, a possible systems-based Read full review. Contents. The Use and Abuse of the Modern Intersexual. 45. How Biologists Make a Difference. 115. Gender Becomes Chemical. 170. Copyright. 3 other sections not shown. Other editions - View all. Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality Anne Fausto-Sterling Limited preview - 2020.