

Anne Fausto-Sterling Interview

00:22:

Professor Laura Sjoberg (LS):

Welcome and thank you for being a part of the Gender Institute's launch event. We're thrilled to have Professor Anne Fausto-Sterling and get to ask her some questions about her research, her career and thinking about gender in academic and beyond. So, welcome Professor Fausto-Sterling.

0:42:

Professor Anne Fausto-Sterling (AFS):

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me to this event.

0:46:

LS:

We're thrilled to have you and I think I'll start out with a question that we often ask our guests, which is: what got you interested in the study of gender?

0:56:

AFS:

I got interested in the study of gender because of my political activism. I, you know, I was going to school in the 1960s, so that kind of says it. I was a Sixties girl.

1:14:

LS:

Do you still see activism as a key part of your gender-based work? Or do you see the research – what's your feeling about activism now?

1:26:

AFS:

Well, for myself, I would probably define activism in terms of my work. That is, I think that my work contributes to the needs of activists. And I think that doing academic work is an important piece of doing good gender activism. But I'm less often found on a picket line than when I was 25 but not never!

1:59:

LS:

Always a good thing. Most people in gender studies aren't biologists. How do those two things come together?

2:08:

AFS:

So, I was a biologist first, because I'm old enough to have existed with a life before the Women's Movement. And so, as the Women's Movement grew, I was faced with trying to integrate my life, integrate what I did in the laboratory, integrated what my knowledge base was with my activist self and with the needs of the Women's Movement.

2:40:

LS:

What advice would you have for people now interested in studying at the intersection of gender and biology?

2:47:

AFS:

Well, learn both. That is, you have to learn feminist theory and you have to study biology, so you know both fields. You have to bring them together. And I'd also say that this is now an area where there are a lot of people doing just that. So, you don't have to invent it. I had to invent it. But there are now programmes that do it, there are labs that focus on feminist biology. There's the field of feminist science studies. There's a whole lot of ways that you can just do it and it's somewhat ready made for you.

3:27:

LS:

Probably in the last decade there've been a whole lot of, kind of a growth of the movement of women in science and making sure that women are a part of panels and being a part of publications. Have you seen anything in those movements that you find particularly successful or that you wanna challenge?

3:50:

AFS:

That's a tough one. I don't do a lot of that kind of public participation anymore. I'm not on panels much. I don't go to scientific meetings if I can help it. And I think it's one piece of the work that's important. And I'm glad to see that there are people continuing to work to make it happen. I mean, I do think the time is done for us to say, well, we have one woman on a panel of five people and so we're good people. I think it should become more automatic, that there's a reasonable mix – doesn't have to be 50/50 down the middle but I hope the day will come when getting the right people doesn't mean as it was in my early days. Finding the right man for the job but finding the right experts for the need.

4:55:

LS:

You have a new book, right? Either recently out or coming out?

5:00:

AFS:

I have an old book with a new edition.

5:02:

LS:

O.K. Tell us a little about it.

5:03:

O.K. So, the book is *Sexing the Body: Gender, Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* and I wrote it originally in 2000. And in the new edition I've added a new chapter, which sort of brings people up to date on how I'm thinking sex, gender and sexuality these days. I also added in a kind of update on various themes that I developed in the original book. So, the new book has significant new material in it, or the new edition does.

5:43:

LS:

And who do you hope learns from the book in terms of readership and people to push your agenda forward?

5:54:

AFS:

Well, the book is used a lot in women's studies and gender studies courses, at least in the U.S., I don't know about Great Britain. And it has been translated into a few languages, I'm always ready for more. But I think it gets used quite a lot by students and then the occasional lay-reader who isn't in school, really around the world I think it's used quite a lot.

6:22:

LS:

And one of the main arguments you make is about the ways in which the relationship between sex and gender is often misinterpreted. Could you tell us about general misinterpretations and how your work kind of fixes that?

6:39:

AFS:

Well, I'm not sure my work fixes it. But what I – and I'm not alone in this – and several other scholars in gender studies and biology have started doing this. Using a new compound phrase that I pronounce 'gendersex', with an emphasis on the first part of the word but I consider it one word. And that's because I think the distinction between sex and gender is

almost an impossible one to maintain if you understand the body as in constantly reacting and changing to the things it has experienced. So, you know, there's no such thing as sex hormones. In fact, which is something I argued even in 2000, but even the hormones we associate with being of higher concentration in men compared to women for example, are never a known concentration. They are only a concentration of a certain sort. In the context of the behaviours of the person whose body they are in. So, for example, testosterone levels decrease in men and I'll have an example of this in the PowerPoint on Thursday, decrease in men who are involved in infant care compared to men who are not. So, the gender part of that is a culture or situation or context in which men are doing childcare changes their body and changes aspects of their body that we normally associate with having to do with quote 'sex'. So, I think the term 'sex' almost doesn't exist outside of the social world and experience of the body. Nor does 'gender' alone exist outside of the body. So, I wanna give a tip of the hat to both terms. But I think they can only be understood together as a unity.

8:46:

LS:

Your work has always been pioneering in convincing people that there aren't just two sexes or two genders. Can you tell us how that fits into your work?

8:59:

AFS:

Well, that was very much a part of the work that I did in the first edition of *Sexing the Body*, where I wanted to explore the whole question of what social construction means if we're talking about biology. And to do that, I looked at the question of the development of intermediate forms, so-called 'intersex' and how the medical world addressed the existence of such human beings. How they addressed them when they were born as babies, how they tried to figure out how to handle them as they grew into children and adults. And what one sees is that we have a binary set of categories into which a non-binary group of possibilities tries to get fit. And whether you think of it as a continuum or a set of discrete categories, the main point is that as a culture, we primarily try to use two categories and make everybody fit into them.

10:16:

LS:

So, now a number of people have kind of started the trend of identifying their gender pronouns when they identify their name. How does that, does that kind of address some of your concerns or – how do you feel about that?

10:37:

AFS:

I mean, I feel fine about it. I think if it helps people clarify their stance in the world and their place in the world, if they are unhappy having been misnamed. I mean, I used to get misnamed when I was a young scientist. This is so way before the days of online anything,

really. The use of computers by anybody. And there used to be this system where people would send each other through the mail hard-copy reprints. And you'd send out postcards to people saying, 'could you please send me a reprint of your article, such and such published, and such and such a paper'. And I would get these reprint card requests addressed to 'Dear Sir'. And it really made me mad. And that was an example of being misgendered, not in the way that it has to do with the trans-activist movement now but sometimes I would ignore it and sometimes I would cross it out, return the postcard saying, 'please call me by my proper name', and, you know, it did depend quite a bit on my mood and maybe I had too much time on my hands. But I think that letting people know what pronouns you want to be addressed by is a fine thing and I don't see any reason not to respect a person's desire to have pronouns used the way they wish them to be used.

12:22:

LS:

You've done some work on sex, gender and early childhood development that I think might be kind of new to some of the people watching this. Could you tell us a little bit about that work?

12:34:

AFS:

Well, I'll be telling you a lot about that work on Thursday. I mean, that really will be the main thrust of what I have to say. But I'm really interested in how gender is part of the world, of an infant's world from even before birth and how it might be communicated through the daily activities of feeding and diapering and talking to a baby and playing with the baby, how gender becomes part of the baby's world and how they then absorb it from the world long before they can express their own sense at age three or older, of who they think they are.

13:24:

LS:

Well, I look forward to seeing that in your talk. O.K. Just a couple of last questions. The first is: do you have any advice for students getting involved in the study of gender now? Things that might be interesting to study or life pro-tips or something like that?

13:42:

AFS:

I don't and here's why: I think that the things that interest students who are – we don't even want to say how many years younger than me – are going to be different than what interests me. I mean, I have a bunch of things I'm still very interested in and I'm trying to write about and follow up on. But they aren't necessarily what moves the 18-year-old or the 20-year-old or the 25-year-old and so my only quote, 'pro-tip' is: if a question is really driving you, study it.

14:21:

LS:

So, what are you working on and writing about now?

14:25:

AFS:

Well, it's a follow up of the work that I'll talk about on Thursday but right this minute I'm trying to do qualitative rather than quantitative studies, analyses of these tapes I have of mothers and infants interacting in order to see more clearly how worlds of narratives of gender begin to get formed in these early days. And this has led me down a little bit of a rabbit hole in a paper I'm trying to write now that talks about how we as scientists narrate the interactions. So, how we are. And in qualitative science, the observer is not an observer without looking down, not the Donna Haraway's 'God's-Eye' view, but is in there, narrating, and has their own point of view. So, I've started to write this paper about what it means to narrate, or how infant development has gotten narrated, and how gender has or hasn't gotten narrated. And that's gotten me a little bit into the history of child psychology which is a fascinating little rabbit hole that I'm right in the middle of now. Now I'll have to pull out of it and see how I pull it all together. So, I guess it's a theoretical paper based on these observations that I'm trying to make.

16:06:

LS:

O.K. And then one last question that we try and ask everybody because we get such different and interesting answers to it, which is: if you could name some of your intellectual kind of heroes or people that you are indebted to intellectually or that your work was inspired by, who would you tell us about?

16:27:

AFS:

I'd tell you about Esther Thelen, who was the person who really brought dynamic systems theory to the fore. I was also, as a younger person, inspired by Karl Marx. There are probably other people but those are the two that come to mind spontaneously.

16:54:

LS:

Well, thanks. We appreciate it and we look forward to hearing you talk on Thursday.

17:00:

AFS:

O.K. I look forward to giving it.