

Sexuality and gender politics in post-war era as depicted in judith butler, angel...

[Profession](#), [Philosophers](#)



The politics of gender and sexuality became increasingly prominent during the post-war and late-twentieth century periods both for women and society at large. How is this addressed in texts you have studied on this module?

Gender and sexuality have been fields of debate in the post war era that reflect the myriad of social, economic, political and intellectual changes that have shaped the western world from the 1950s onwards.

Postwar prosperity, a decline in pre war collectivism, the shift of many western countries towards greater individualism from the 1970s onwards, and the growth in the influence of psychoanalysis and linguistics over most areas of academic discourse following the post 1956 and 1968 decline in the popularity and influence of Marxism, saw sweeping changes to how the questions of gender and sexuality were addressed.

In this essay I will explore how the diverse writings of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Angela Carter explored issues surrounding gender and sexuality, and what impact they had on the discourses of the time.

Michel Foucault's first volume of his History of Sexuality addresses not so much sexuality itself, as the manner in which modern industrial society has responded to sexuality, and particularly sexualities that can be labelled deviant.

His hypothesis is that from the 17th Century onwards, a once freely expressed sexual discourse was repressed by bourgeois society in the interests of the new commercial and industrial society that was emerging.

A discourse on sex was disruptive to the new bourgeois world and non productive sexualities, those which were anything other than the monogamous heterosexual couple were channelled into the brothel or the lunatic asylum, thus making deviant sexualities productive.

Though Foucault has denied that he is an historian, he addressed the issue of gender and sexuality when he wrote his History of Sexuality in much the same way.

It is important to remember that throughout the 1970s, linguistics and postmodernism posed a considerable challenge to departments within academic institutions which viewed themselves as separate or unique, English literature scholars began to consider questions that philosophers had previously dominated, and philosophers began to study areas that had once been the preserve of historians. It was in this intellectual climate that Foucault began to address questions of sexuality, and how we arrived at the state of sexual repression that he claimed existed. He was one of a generation of scholars who pioneered a multi disciplinary approach, combining philosophy with history and cultural criticism, so his approach to questions of sexual politics draw from a range of epistemologies.

As an investigator of the phenomenon of sexual repression, Foucault has actually performed the task of an empiricist historian exceedingly well, he has addressed the investigation into sexual repression by reading a wealth of primary evidence, and drawing out a clear set of conclusions.

Foucault argued that far from sexual discourse being eliminated by the Victorians, it was channelled and adapted and that a science of sexuality emerged. He states that: “ At the level of discourses and their domains... There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerning sex.” The Catholic confessional was replaced by more legal, juridical and scientific ways of telling and revealing, and the channelling of a repressed sexuality through these more official and powerful discourses led to sex being discussed far more widely than before, but in a very different manner. What Foucault calls *Scientia Sexualis*, or the science of sexuality, was the emergent capitalist world’s way of harnessing sexuality and using it to provide sufficient numbers of workers and soldiers to keep the capitalist system going. He writes: “ One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of the “ population” as an economic and political problem; population as wealth, as population, as manpower or labour capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were they not dealing simply with subjects, or even with “ the people” but with a “ population.”

If Foucault can be said to have addressed the politics of sexuality and gender through an examination of the origins of sexual repression, the same cannot be said of Judith Butler.

Butler instead examines how gender roles and identity are formed and how exploration of gender identity is curtailed through the limitations of language and performativity.

In her seminal 1990 text *Gender Trouble*, she examines Freud, Derrida and Foucault amongst others and puts forward the argument that far from being determined by biology alone, gender is largely a culturally or socially constructed phenomena.

She writes: “ If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.”

This, however, is quite an ‘ if’, from Butler’s post structuralist perspective, gender itself has no overarching dominant meaning, and the semiotics of gender in the late 20th Century have become fragmented and are interchangeable. Men are able to appropriate ‘ the feminine’ when it suits them, and women can do the same with ‘ the masculine’ experimenting bodily and semiotically with the trappings of either gender. Butler questions whether it is appropriate at all to ascribe gender to an individual, and if so, how the idea of ‘ gender’ is arrived at. The area of sex is equally problematic, she argues, and in doing so draws on Foucault, by questioning: “ Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or, histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?” Butler draws on Roland Barthes ideas of mythologisation, the removal of politics and history from a concept and its replacement with a sense of ‘

naturalness', in the construction of a 'natural' sense of sexuality or gender. What she describes as 'stylised body acts – the semiotics of fashion and the enhancement, augmentation and alteration of the body (described by Foucault as 'technologies of self'), establish the illusion of a 'core gender'. She describes gender as performative, essentially an act that the individual plays out to the world in order to announce certain key ideas about their gender identity, and in this way Butler seems to suggest that gender itself is a language. As with both Derrida and Foucault key influences on Butler, she does not see the 'language' of gender as something freely entered into or without regulation or even sanctions. Regulative discourses that punish transgression are clearly identifiable, with some sexualities and gender identities being accepted and others made deviant. Angela Carter 1979 anthology of fairy tales *The Bloody Chamber* is an example of how the politics of gender and identity were translated into fiction. The ability of Carter's female characters to break free of the traditional conventions of the gothic or romantic fairy tale and to have agency within the narrative or to be sexually liberated was a deliberate and politicised point on the part of the author. The story *The Bloody Chamber* begins with the narrator describing her train journey to Paris "I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage." The narrator's use of sensual and semi

eroticised imagery, the 'delicious ecstasy of excitement' and of 'great pistons thrusting away' describe the everyday, the common place and the non sexual, and the choice of such language is an attempt to empower her. By enabling the female protagonist, and therefore the reader identifying with the feminine, to read the world in erotic terms it serves to liberate the female from being merely the subject of male fantasy or the male gaze.

Carter's career as a writer of fiction and non fiction was focused around addressing questions of gender and identity politics, normally by defying the literary conventions, devised, as she saw it, to serve patriarchy. Where weak female characters, normally passive or eroticised breaks in the male led action existed in traditional gothic novels and fairy tales, Carter introduced strong female heroines, reinventing the genre in order to address contemporary debates regarding feminism and identity. Elements of the Gothic (large houses, elderly trapped mother figures, a sense of threat, and questioning ones sanity) and elements of the horrific are tools used by Carter to explore the questions confronting women in daily life. Themes of subjugation and the loss of identity are prevalent within the Bloody Chamber, echoing the experience of marriage for many women in post war Britain. Much of the narrative is given over the struggle of the narrator to prevent herself being completely overwhelmed by her sadistic husband. Carter's use of the fairy tale is interesting, as a dominant reading of many popular tales by writers such as the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen is that of 'cautionary tale', a fantasy that can be explored and imagined by the reader, but which transmits universal truths about the

human condition. In using the cautionary tale, entwined with the fantastic, Carter explores areas of taboo and creates a space where the fears and anxieties of modern women can be articulated and explored.

Whilst Foucault, Butler and Carter's contributions to the discussion of gender and identity politics from the 1970s onwards have taken diverse forms and addressed different points, there are a number of core themes that unite all three. At first glance it would be tempting to distinguish between Foucault and Butler as theorists, and Carter as a writer of fiction, but that is to ignore the wider context of Carter's work, particularly her work as an editor, and her work also as a cultural critic and feminist non fiction writer. Even within her fictional work there are still core ideas that she shares with Foucault and Butler, regarding the construction of gender and the invention of sexual discourse.

All three writers see the ways in which sexuality and gender are discussed through the prism of post structuralism, writing at a time when the linguistic turn in the humanities was dominant. The idea of an invented or constructed way of thinking about and perceiving gender and the self is a common theme in Butler's work, and invented notions of gender are challenged and subverted in Carters. Foucault traces the source of the invention of discourse, finding it in the origins of industrial society itself. All three attempt to engage critically with invented notions of sexuality and the self, and all three are broadly emancipatory in their approach and their aspirations.