

Tom Waidzunas. *The Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-Gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. \$27.00 (paper). 321 pp. ISBN 978-0-8166-9615-4.

Like any good history, *The Straight Line* has a stake beyond recording facts. Tom Waidzunas's book tells a chronological story of conversion therapy<sup>1</sup>, i.e., psychotherapeutic and spiritual practices that aim to make gay people straight. Through this history, however, the author unpicks what it means to be "gay" or "straight". Proponents of conversion therapy, such as the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), construe same-gender attraction as acquired through adverse childhood experiences and changeable through psychotherapy. Opponents of conversion therapy, such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and most mainstream scientists, view same-gender attraction as healthy and beyond the individual's control. Therefore, *The Straight Line* is as much the chronicle of a philosophical and scientific debate as it is the story of a social and political conflict.

It is always tempting to view history as a story of inevitable progress, but this temptation seems irresistible in the case of conversion therapy. Robert Spitzer authored an infamous paper (Spitzer, 2003) supporting the effectiveness of the therapy, while Ariel Shidlo and Michael Schroeder exposed the dangers of attempts to change sexual clients' orientation (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002). In an interview towards the end of his career, Spitzer largely conceded to his critics and admitted his research was flawed. Both Shidlo and Schroeder's (2002) warnings about the harm of conversion therapy and Spitzer's latter conclusion about the lack of supporting evidence are now commonly accepted. Conversion therapy is opposed by major mental health organizations such as the APA or the British Psychological Society, and it is illegal (mostly for minors) in several jurisdictions within the US, Canada, Australia, and the EU. How else can we tell this story than a defeat for conversion

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<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase 'conversion therapy' in this review because it is more widely used than 'reparative therapy', 'reorientation therapy' or 'ex-gay therapy' (see, e.g., Google Trends). The reader interested in terminology will find relevant discussion throughout the book.

therapy and a victory for gay rights? The merit of Tom Waidzunus is that he does not allow us to be complacent, but shows us both the complexities of the battle against conversion therapy, and its recalcitrant survival into the present day.

After laying out his theoretical premises in the Introduction, Waidzunus moves on to cover the main stages of the history of conversion therapy. The chapters are chronological, but they each center around a key issue. Chapter 1 is an account of conversion therapy's pre-history, looking at the times when homosexuality was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (prior to 1972). Robert Spitzer was both a key advocate for removing homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses and the best know promoter of conversion therapy. As Spitzer embodied the tensions in the sexual politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chapter 2 is rightfully dedicated to his career, examined via documents and personal interviews with the author. In the early 2000s, both the gay rights movement and the APA formulated their rebuttals of conversion therapy; these reactions are addressed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. Then, as conversion therapy loses influence in the US, Chapter 5 follows it into its Ugandan exile. Specifically, conversion therapy has recently found support in Uganda, where it fits within the broader legal and social exclusion of sexual minorities.

In its central narrative, Waidzunus's book is not about science defeating ignorance or justice overcoming oppression: it is a history of competing social movements. The gay rights and the 'ex-gay' movements are studied as two social forces aiming to influence science. Waidzunus follows their successes and their defeats, such as the rejection of conversion therapy by the APA and its resurgence in Uganda; their struggles for legitimacy, mostly through testimonials on both the harms and benefits of conversion therapy; and their discursive weapons, such the "born this way" slogan of the gay rights movement and the ex-gay exhortation of one's right to choose conversion therapy.

The author aims to be balanced in his presentation of the two movements ("To adhere to the principles of symmetry as best as possible", p. 259). In practice, however, "symmetry" makes for an unduly hesitant prose: The title of the Conclusion, "Sexuality is a matter of perspective" (p. 231)

illustrates how this restrained style does not always do justice to the finesse of Waidzunas's argument.

As a researcher of international homophobia, I find the chapter on conversion therapy in Uganda to be of foremost importance. At the time this book was being written, *The Economist* ran a cover story entitled "The Gay Divide: Half the world has leapt forward... but too many countries are going backwards". The title seems justified: while some (often Western) countries recognize same-gender marriage and outlaw homophobic discrimination, violence and legal inequality are widespread in many other (often non-Western) countries. But the two halves of the world are not isolated. Many in Africa regard gay rights (and homosexuality itself) as an unwelcome cultural import from former colonial powers. Ironically, anti-gay discourses and practices (such as conversion therapy) are indeed borrowed from the West. Through his case study of Uganda, Waidzunas shows how discourses and organizations from the "forward leaping" half of the world have a role in the "backwards move" of other half.

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#### References

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