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Scott Gunther, *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-present*. New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. vii + 166 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0230221055.

Review by Tamara Chaplin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The concept of republican universalism has long been considered integral to the development of modern French society. But in what ways does political ideology actually shape historical change? Scott Gunther does a fine job of revealing one example of how this process works in his engrossing examination of the history of homosexuality in postwar France. Taking as its tripartite foci the law, politics and the media, Gunther's *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-present*, compellingly illustrates how French republican values both supported and inhibited the freedoms, rights and social practices of French homosexuals during the postwar period. Gunther, who has a law degree and a Ph.D. in French studies (both from New York University), is uniquely positioned to perform this type of analysis. The fact that this is, by his own admission, primarily a history of male homosexuality, is a point to which I shall return.

Gunther's history of French homosexual life since World War II makes three central claims: first, that decisive legal gains for homosexuals do not necessarily reflect changes in societal mores (which are often notable for their conservative continuity); second, that the contemporary history of homosexual life in France is not simply a narrative of liberation (but rather a series of strategic moves that have sometimes delimited social freedoms); and thirdly that the discursive resilience of French republican universalism has ultimately "stymied French homosexuals from mobilizing politically around sexual identities" resulting instead (at least in recent decades), in "a surprisingly strong reverence for heteronormative values"(pp. 2-3). In essence this is a book that uses republican universalism to illuminate the history of homosexuality in modern France while also using the history of homosexuality to explore the merits and constraints of republican universalism. Throughout, Gunther employs what he coins "the elastic closet" as a metaphor for the dynamic malleability of the French republican state.

Composed of an introduction and four short, chronologically ordered chapters, *The Elastic Closet* opens with a discussion of the decision inscribed in the Penal Code of 1791 to decriminalize sodomy. France, we are told, was the first country in the modern world to enact such legislation. Four core republican values (secularism, the separation between public and private spheres, liberalism and universalism) collectively sustained the legalization of homosexuality in France and delimited the more obvious instances of homophobia in the centuries that followed. But did this momentous legal judgment signal greater *social* acceptance of homosexuality? Far from it, as Gunther astutely reminds us, for there is no necessary causal connection between legal and social change (p. 7). While Gunther concedes that "the 1791 legal reform represents an exceptionally radical and abrupt break" with preceding laws, he agrees with Michael Sibalis that "the decriminalization of sodomy was simply a fortuitous and unforeseen consequence" of the secularization of criminal law (Sibalis quoted in Gunther, p. 10).

The point that Gunther is interested in making here, and which he does via a brief sketch of laws regulating homosexuality since the Romans, is that the decision to decriminalize homosexuality during the French Revolution was likely a byproduct of “legislative silence” which, in turn, was a passive result of new beliefs about the inviolable universality of individual rights and the rule of reason, and not an active, approbative choice. It was the secularist impulse to eliminate “crimes of superstition,” such as witchcraft, blasphemy, heresy and by extension, sodomy, combined with the liberal injunction--and this is key--that every crime must have a victim (something private sexual acts between consenting adults failed to produce) that ultimately resulted in the erasure of the crime. However, the legalization of sodomy fails to indicate either that the French people were more liberal about sexual practices than their contemporaries or that homosexuals were more accepted in France than elsewhere. Rather, Gunther argues, post-Revolutionary French society remained largely intolerant of homosexual practices. For the next century and a half, he concludes, opponents of legalization--from police and lawyers to judges and medical professionals--managed to “use the existing nondiscriminatory laws...in discriminatory ways”(p. 16). Given that sodomy was legal, how, precisely, was this done?

Nineteenth century legislators recognized that, as a “victimless crime,” sodomy “could not be penalized without violating basic principles of the French legal system” (pp. 13-14). The trick was to determine whether homosexuality *could* be shown to cause harm. As Gunther explains, medical ‘experts’ found homosexuality’s juridical Achilles heel in theories of contagion, which--under the influence of the work of Louis Pasteur--were rapidly gaining in popularity. With homosexuality commonly viewed, not as a sin against God, but rather as a sin against society, social fears about sexual deviance supported the view that homosexuality was *not* a purely private consensual practice, but rather a dangerously contagious behavior that weakened the nation’s moral fiber. Further, social commentators insisted (especially in the disastrous aftermath of the first World War) that homosexuality had two potential victims: the “public” and “youth.” Male homosexuals in particular, were harassed on charges of public indecency and accused of contaminating French youth and posing a danger to “the public order.”

Chapter one of Gunther’s text, ironically entitled “It Could Have Been Worse (1940s-1960s),” elaborates how nineteenth-century concepts of victimhood and contagion were used in the mid-twentieth century to end France’s legal silence regarding homosexuality. In 1942, the Vichy regime established a separate age of sexual majority for homosexuals, thus providing the law with the victim (in this case, youth) that it required. Whereas heterosexual activity remained legal from age thirteen (later raised in 1945 to fifteen), homosexual behavior was deemed illegal until the age of twenty-one (later lowered in 1974 to eighteen before its complete repeal in 1982). Importantly, as Gunther notes, since eighteen was actually recognized in France as the age of “discernment,” raising the legal age for homosexuality another three years (to twenty-one), betrayed an explicit desire on the part of lawmakers to control the homosexual population writ large--a desire kept in check only through adherence to the basic principles of the republican legal system. Likewise, the law passed in 1960 (under the Mirguet Amendment) that doubled the penalty for public indecency when homosexuality was at cause, similarly exhibited, “a compromise between the desire to restrict homosexuality more broadly and the need to respect the values of the French Republic,” values that both protected the private sphere and required that every crime have a victim (p. 37).

The remainder of the chapter illustrates how the passage of these laws directly influenced the agendas of the two most significant (primarily male) homosexual groups active in France during these years, the *Club Futur* (1952-1955) and the longer-lived *Arcadie* (1954-1982). It was in response to these laws, Gunther posits, that members of some homosexual political groups

actually internalized the association between male homosexuality, pederasty and pedophilia during the 1950s and 1960s. *Arcadie's* strategy for combating this association required "representing homosexuals as masculine, dignified, socially responsible individuals" in both private and public life. The result, Gunther suggests, "left room for only limited, relatively passive political engagement" (p. 41). For Gunther, this point is key, since it leads directly to the question of the relationship between cultural identity, effective political action, legal change and social acceptance.

Although the discriminatory laws of 1942 and 1960 remained in force throughout the 1970s, the movements for homosexual rights that emerged during that decade produced some of the most radical forms of political action ever seen in France. Chapter two, "Attempts at Subversion (The 1970s)," analyzes this rupture with the conservative homosexual politics of the 1950s and 1960s via an exploration of three militant groups: the FHAR (*Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire*), the GLHs (*Groupes de libération homosexuelle*) and the CUARH (*Comité d'urgence anti-répression homosexuelle*) (p. 46). Emerging in the anarchist aftermath of the student revolutions of May '68, the FHAR and the GLHs that followed were both interested in the radical restructuring of society. Anti-assimilationist, anti-republican and strident defenders of radical difference, these groups rejected compromise and accommodation, seeking instead total homosexual liberation through the complete eradication of the age of sexual majority and rejection of "bourgeois" institutions like marriage and the nuclear family. Gunther effectively illustrates how their demands fell on deaf ears. Indeed, he writes, "the anti-republican defense of radical difference" was "entirely incapable of producing legal change" (p. 46). Only once the CUARH adopted a more moderate and cooperative approach—abandoning calls for the "right to difference" in favor of "a universalist, republican discourse of sameness" in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were gay rights activists able to achieve positive legal change (namely, in the repeal of the laws of 1960 and eventually, 1942) (p. 65).

The assertion that what Gunther calls the "ethos of assimilation" now characterizes gay life in France is at the center of chapter three, "French Homosexuals Build a more Stately Closet (the 1980s-2000)." It is also this claim that turns the narrative of gay liberation on its head, refuting the idealized myth that most contemporary gay organizations are the heirs of the revolutionary radical discourse of the early 1970s. Gunther acknowledges that his re-reading is a "less politically appealing interpretation of recent French gay political history," but he argues nevertheless for its veracity (p. 68). In exchange for greater social integration and acceptance, Gunther insists that by the end of the 1980s, most homosexual movements had eliminated the "less palatable elements"—be that pedophilic, sadomasochistic, transsexual, transvestite, or promiscuous—from their public and political agendas. Further, he maintains that once French homosexuals willingly traded external censure for internal self-control, opportunities for social assimilation increased, ultimately resulting in a series of important legal victories, from the passage of the anti-discrimination law of 1985, to the legal recognition of same-sex couples following the ratification of the law on civil unions (the PaCS) in 1999.

Chapter three supports this argument by examining three social spaces: the Marais, the magazine *Gai pied*, and what Gunther identifies as the "legal-political" space first characterized by the political apathy that followed the outbreak of AIDs in the early 1980s, but which later led to the breakthroughs just listed above. While I doubt that readers of *Gai pied* ever saw themselves as having much in common with the more conservative homophile movement typified by *Arcadie* in the 1950s, Gunther makes a powerful argument for continuity. As he shows, all three of the "spaces" promoted new forms of homosexual respectability and new images—handsome, muscular, masculine—for French gays (or at least, I would nuance, for French gay men). Gunther's overarching contention is that armed with this "more respectable"

face, French homosexuals achieved legal change, but at a cost: through the construction of their own “more stately” closet.

Chapter four, “‘Outing’ the French Gay Media (the 1990s and 2000s),” extends the line of reasoning developed in the previous chapter through the present moment. Here, Gunther shifts from how universalist discourse has shaped political demands and legal reform to its impact on the gay media during a period “that has been marked by more media messages than any other since the Second World War” (p. 91). Taking on three contemporary media sources, the magazine *Télu*, the magazine *Préférences*, and the French television station, PinkTV, Gunther illustrates how in keeping with the social imperative to assimilate and under pressure from republican values, even ostensibly “gay” media isn’t able to be “out” about its actual audience in France.

Gunther’s argument is that in order not to appear to be directed towards a particular social group (and in so doing negate the abstract liberal individual at the core of republican universalism) all forms of French media—and in this case, gay media—must necessarily purport to address society as a whole. Further, Gunther sees this as an example of how contemporary French gays have internalized socially inscribed rhetorics of self-control so profoundly that they are now quite literally wielding the tools of their own oppression, in part by producing culturally specific forms of reverse tokenism. In this instance, media outlets like PinkTV include “members of the dominant majority in a space intended for members of a minority group in order to avoid being accused of self-ghettoization” (p.119). Gunther reads such moves as unequivocal evidence confirming the “continued rhetorical force of republicanism” on the gay community in France (p. 119).

*The Elastic Closet* is an engrossing read and (not surprisingly given Gunther’s credentials), is at its very best when conducting in-depth analysis of legal change. Yet I wonder how a broader—and more inclusive—source base might call some of the book’s conclusions into question. And here I return to my opening query, which (to spin off the title of an article by Linda Garber) might ask, “Where in the World are the Lesbians?”<sup>[1]</sup> Like most general histories of homosexuality in the twentieth century, Gunther’s work mentions lesbians mainly in order to justify their absence (Florence Tamagne’s two-volume history of homosexuality in interwar Europe is one of the rare examples that doesn’t do this).<sup>[2]</sup> The political and legal narratives that shape histories like Gunther’s (I’m thinking here of the work of authors like Frédéric Martel, Jean Le Bitoux, and earlier, Jacques Girard) are frequently told relative to a set of laws and behaviors—on sodomy, prostitution, cruising and pedophilia—that have less relevance for the lesbian community.<sup>[3]</sup>

But if legal history fails to shed the same light on the history of lesbianism that it does on the history of gay men, then does Gunther’s overarching claim about the role of republican universalism in shaping homosexual history *per se* still stand? Certainly, when Gunther does include women, his arguments are less convincing. Thus, for example, should *Télu* magazine’s repeated (and unsuccessful) attempts to attract a lesbian readership be interpreted as evidence that Republican universal values can be found at the heart of its publishing mission? Or, might we simply presume that this inclusive, if failed, agenda was commercially motivated since broader readership translates into financial gain? And how might an analysis of France’s longest running gay magazine, *Lesbia*, which *is* aimed exclusively at a gay female readership, confound Gunther’s neat equation about the relationship between homosexuality, the media and the Republican state?

Such questions aside, by analyzing how gay men in France fought for social, cultural, legal and political recognition in a country where the protection of the abstract liberal individual militates

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against official acknowledgement of sexual, religious, ethnic or racial identity, *The Elastic Closet* offers an investigation of the difficulties of exercising difference, writ large, in a globalizing world. As such it makes an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship in the history of sexuality, queer theory, the media and national identity and would make an excellent addition to graduate and upper division undergraduate courses alike.

## NOTES

[1] Linda Garber, "Where in the World Are the Lesbians," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14/1,2(January 2005/April 2005): 28-50.

[2] Published in English as Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939, Volume I & II* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006).

[3] Frédéric Martel, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France since 1968*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Jean Le Bitoux, Hervé Chevaux and Bruno Proth, *Citoyen de seconde zone* (Paris: Hachette, 2003); and Jacques Girard, *Le mouvement homosexuel en France 1945-1980* (Paris: Editions Syros, 1981).

Tamara Chaplin  
University of Illinois At Urbana-Champaign  
[tchaplin@illinois.edu](mailto:tchaplin@illinois.edu)

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