

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Ghaziani, Amin. *Sex Cultures*. Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2017, 222 pages, paper, (9780745670409).

In *Sex Cultures*, Amin Ghaziani provides an accessible introduction to thinking about sex and culture as central components to understanding sexuality. Ghaziani starts by asking readers to re-examine their assumptions about sexuality and to use their cultural imagination to see the sex cultures around them. Sex cultures refers to “the diverse contexts and customs that give meaning to our bodies and the ways we use them in our pursuit of pleasure” (16). Throughout the book, he draws from a wealth of interdisciplinary research and theories on sexualities to situate the reader within the broader literature. Using this literature and case studies at the beginning and conclusion of each chapter, Ghaziani helps readers explore how the seemingly abstract concepts of sexuality and culture can be uncovered throughout history and in their everyday lives.

Ghaziani hopes readers will takeaway three main insights about sexuality and culture from this work. The first objective is to make the reader rethink the significance of sex beyond bodies and biology. The second is to expand the reader’s outlook on sex from the private to the public domain. The third goal is to show how dominant meanings about sex are a product of their particular time and place. To accomplish these objectives, Ghaziani examines four themes via the book’s substantive chapters.

Chapter 1 situates sexuality in “The City,” discussing the emergence, recent decline and historical importance of “gayborhoods” in major urban cities. He describes the cultural elements of these neighborhoods – the different bodies, institutions, symbols, customs, commemorations, and histories – that illuminate how cultural meanings related to sexuality operate within these neighborhoods. Ghaziani examines the history of these urban areas by questioning what led to and came after the “great gay migration” (33). Through his historical lens, he examines the role of love and intimacy, different institutions, economic opportunities, and gender inequality on where gay and lesbian individuals formed communities. He then critically considers the implications of heterosexual individuals entering and potentially co-opting the gayborhoods alongside the

increase in “LGB” rights and public acceptance that makes it appear as though we are in a “post-gay” era.

In Chapter 2, “Politics and Protest” he continues to show how culture shapes sexuality by drawing on his extensive expertise on political protests and social movements. He produces a historical account of LGBTQ politics. Here, he discusses two distinctive – and highly contentious – strategic approaches to activism: whether to emphasize sameness or differences to fight for rights and recognition. He then reviews the literature on three political sex cultures. He first examines the research on two earlier political sex cultures that emphasized differences: “gay liberation and lesbian feminism” and “queer activism.” Then, he compares those sex cultures to the more recent activism around legalizing “marriage equality” that has made the strategic choice to emphasize sameness. By discussing some of the debates and controversies about sameness and difference, Ghaziani shows how different political sex culture can emerge within the same social movement and discusses the importance of culture for LGBTQ politics.

In Chapter 3, “Heterosexualities,” Ghaziani continues his examination of queer worlds by presenting research that challenges the notion that heterosexuality is ahistorical. Focusing on the work of Jonathan Ned Katz, Ghaziani constructs a historical map of what heterosexuality has meant in different time periods. He then uses recent examples from academic research, popular culture, and media to show how sexual identities are performed, displayed, politicized, and negotiated through language and behaviors. One of the most interesting points is in Ghaziani’s distinctions between straight men’s sexual behaviors and their adherence to the culture of heteronormativity. Through his examination of the research on sexual fluidity and straight-identifying men’s same-sex behaviors, he seems to suggest that heterosexual culture may be shifting. These examples produce new and exciting lines of inquiry for future researchers.

In Chapter 4, he discusses the challenges of studying sexuality. He first discusses the differences in the rates of people who self-identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual compared to individuals engaging in same-sex behaviors. He then discusses how rates of same-sex behavior and attraction differ based on gender and race, highlighting how different groups attach different cultural meanings to sexual behaviors. This chapter then examines how to ‘measure’ who is gay, lesbian and bisexual, how to ask effective questions, how to study trans* populations, and the best practices for studying sex. Throughout, he emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in the generation of surveys, while also

providing relevant critiques about exclusively understanding sexuality through statistical data.

For those interested in using this book in the classroom, it is worth clarifying that it is explicitly not intended to be an exhaustive review of the subfields, theoretical frameworks and perspectives on sexuality. Therefore, as an educational tool, its main limitation is in its scope. The author rightfully acknowledges that readers seeking a book that provides a comprehensive overview of the field will want to look elsewhere. The book also does not offer an exhaustive examination of sex cultures. Nonetheless, *Sex Cultures* provides a unique and new way to examine sexuality through a cultural lens. It is accessible, easy to read and enjoyable, making it a great introduction for students learning about sexuality and culture. In each of the substantive chapters, Ghaziani offers many thought-provoking discussion questions to spur conversation and debate. Through his debate driven approach that combines academic research, case studies, and discussion questions, Ghaziani provides readers the opportunity to apply the complex concepts that are discussed in the book to understanding how these concepts unfold in their everyday social lives. These qualities make *Sex Cultures* a valuable option for instructors teaching courses on culture and sexuality.

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Nicole Andrejek a recent Ph.D. graduate in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University. Her research interests include sexual cultures in the university setting, sexual behaviours, and gender differences in sexual pleasure. She is currently working on her first book, *Dating in the Digital Age*, in which she investigates university hookup culture, students use of dating apps, and undergraduate women's experiences with non-consensual sexual encounters and negotiating sexual consent.

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