

**TSR[edition] Magazine**  
**Book Reviews**  
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**Book details:**

Sylvie Tissot

Gayfriendly: Acceptance and control of homosexuality in New York and Paris

Polity Press

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Review by: Dr Lindsey Metcalf McGrath

In the context of French ‘La manif pour tous’ protests emergent in 2012 to oppose gay marriage and adoption, Sylvie Tissot set out to understand how such strong anti-gay sentiments persist in increasingly tolerant and diverse societies. In *“Gayfriendly: Acceptance and control of homosexuality in New York and Paris”*, Tissot shares her in-depth study of attitudes towards homosexuality with straight and gay residents of the Marais district of Paris and New York’s Park Slope. She identifies these as locations where gay and lesbian communities have been visible since the 1980s and cohabit alongside the straight population. The Marais is known as an area inhabited by gay men, while lesbians have greater visibility in New York’s Park Slope. During her fieldwork (2011-2016), Tissot interviews 95 people (two thirds of whom identified as heterosexual) as well as socialising in various cafes and bars, churches and synagogues, and community groups and spaces in both districts. She wanted to firstly understand how social progress, or a move towards increased tolerance of homosexuality, actually occurs. Secondly, she wanted to examine how, alongside changing attitudes to homosexuality, the concept of heterosexuality is itself being reshaped.

*“Gayfriendly”* offers a fascinating insight into the views that straight participants hold about their gay and lesbian neighbours. As Tissot points out, heterosexuals are “rarely studied in their own right”. The conversations from the research reveal as much about the hidden intricacies of straight relationships and gender roles in contemporary society as they do about what it means to be gay. The interviews also show that age matters in terms of acceptance of homosexuality. Her participants span three generations, ranging from the oldest (born between 1930 and 1955), one of who admits that seeing women holding hands in the street would make them ‘uncomfortable’ to the youngest group (born between 1975 and 1990) for whom sexual orientation seems ‘irrelevant’ and tolerance the norm – ‘no one gives a damn’.

Tissot dives beneath the surface of the purported ‘gayfriendliness’ of her participants to provide a nuanced and intricate exploration of how acceptance manifests. She points to a multitude of factors

influencing if a neighbourhood can be characterized as gay friendly. The American participants cited equality legislation to justify their views that marriage should be accessible for all. In contrast the French emphasized their belief in individual freedom to practice their sexuality without constraint from the state. Class ethos is major theme in the book and, particularly in the gentrified Park Slope district, the inclusion of gay and lesbians in the community is tightly connected with ideas about what it is to be a good neighbour or member of the church or synagogue. Part of being a good parent was to instill gayfriendliness in their children, and the presence of gay parents (at least those who were white, affluent and 'respectable') was seen as desirable to the school's status.

A central argument of "*Gayfriendly*" is that acceptance of gay and lesbians comes with conditions attached. The respectable gay should be monogamous and married with children, mirroring a 'typical' heterosexual ideal. Interviewees tolerated 'gay love' that was expressed through marriage (acceptable) and disconnected from sex (uncomfortable or even unacceptable topic). Boundaries were drawn between "the gays and lesbians who can be approached, accepted and even integrated, and others still marked by the seal of inferiority" (p115). Some gay parents felt under pressure to present as respectable gays, distancing themselves from a perceived 'gay lifestyle' by making it clear they didn't frequent the local gay bar. Some lesbians felt left out of friendships with other parents or church goers, but were confused about whether homophobia was the underlying cause (since making explicitly homophobia comments would not be socially acceptable). Gay men, especially those in monogamous marriages, were more likely to be tolerated, but acceptance was not extended to certain lesbians deemed 'too assertive', 'unfeminine' or 'ugly'. Although Tissot is at pains to say that "trans people are not absent from the book" (p.5) there was a noticeable lack of discussion of the experiences of trans people or evaluation of the trans friendliness among cis participants.

The originality of this book lies in its insights into what heterosexual people really think about gays and lesbian relationships. Tissot shows us that tolerance of homosexuality is not universal, and that class, race and location are crucial factors in whether gay men and lesbians are deemed 'acceptable'. Her analysis highlights that stigma persists, particularly for lesbians. Tissot argues that gays and lesbians have to be respectable and just different enough – 'cool' but without threatening heterosexual norms. These expectations reinforce their 'otherness' and remind us that equality remains out of reach. "*Gayfriendly*" will be relevant reading for anyone curious about how stigma, othering and homophobia persist, even in societies we assume have become more tolerant and accepting of same sex relationships.

## Reviewer Biography

Lindsey Metcalf McGrath is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University. Her teaching and teaching interests include understanding stigma and inequalities. Dr Metcalf McGrath's current research focuses on experiences of people needing cannabis medicine, and the stigma and harms arising from drugs policy.

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