

Irreconcilable Differences? Intellectual Stalemate in the Gay Rights Debate.

Thomas Caramagno
Westport, CT: Praeger. 2002
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Thomas Caramagno's *Irreconcilable Differences? Intellectual Stalemate in the Gay Rights Debate* purports to be an unbiased examination of the rhetoric of the pro- and anti-gay rights debate. It succeeds admirably. The book, suitable for graduate and undergraduate courses in a number of topics, manages to provide a balanced view of both perspectives. Indeed, Caramagno writes that he began the book with the assumption that both pro-gay and anti-gay rights perspectives had valuable points to contribute to the debate on civil rights in the United States. Whether or not you agree with this perspective, he holds to it consistently. Even upon completion of the book, it is difficult to tell where the author's sympathies lie. Those looking for answers would be advised to try a more dogmatic publication. This is a book for individuals who want to explore the debate.

No one could accuse Caramagno of short-sightedness, as *Irreconcilable Differences* examines the rhetoric around (homo)sexuality in three distinct fields: religion, science, and politics. Each area is given three to four chapters of compelling, informed, and factual discussion. Expertise in just one of these fields would be impressive—expertise in all three is remarkable. For this reason, I suspect that most sexuality professionals and students could learn a thing or two from this tome. While most of the discussion in the chapters on science was familiar to me, I found new and fascinating information in the chapters devoted to religion. In the ones concerning politics, I was able to brush up on the history of the legal debates around sexuality (e.g., famous Supreme Court cases like *Bowers vs. Hardwick*) and to learn some new facts as well.

It is difficult to express my amazement over the variety of sources from which Caramagno was able to draw. He handles all the "big questions" that modern scientists, philosophers, theologians and politicians have about sexual orientation. What is it? What causes it? How many people are gay? How many people are bisexual? Can sexuality be changed? Is homosexuality a sin? Are gay rights special rights, or are they equal rights? Can we compare the gay rights movement to the civil rights movement? A variety of other questions are raised, each accompanied by well-thought out explanations of the reasoning behind the various positions.

It is to Caramagno's credit that he recognizes the diversity within pro-gay and anti-gay rights groups. For example, in the chapters on scientific research on sexual orientation, he discusses how scientists have concluded that sexuality is largely biological and immutable. These scientists are generally presumed to be liberal individuals in favor of gay rights. In the next chapter, however, he discusses individuals who are in favor of gay rights, but take umbrage to the essentialism inherent in much of this biologically-based scientific research. He shows how methodological limitations, difficulty with defining concepts, and "in-between" statuses such as bisexuality and transgenderism present challenges to those conducting scientific research on sexuality. This is a nice example of his ability to explain various positions without endorsing one over another.

If I were to offer one critique of Caramagno's coverage of the issues around sexuality, I would say this: Given that feminist philosophers (e.g., Adrienne Rich) have conducted a long-standing and well-developed debate about women and lesbianism, it is unfortunate that there was not a more focused explanation of feminist perspectives on (homo) sexuality. Although I give Caramagno kudos for including the work of, for example, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I feel that it is a mistake to examine their theories

outside of the historical context of lesbian feminist and poststructuralist thought.

Unfortunately, given the remarkable political events that have taken place in 2003 and 2004, this edition of *Irreconcilable Differences?* is already somewhat out of date. You will find no mention here of the groundbreaking *Lawrence vs. Texas* case, nor a discussion of the Massachusetts Supreme Court's decision to allow gay men and lesbian women to marry. These events simply had not occurred when the book was written. Therefore, instructors wishing to use this book as a text might need to supplement it somewhat to cover more recent events. In the meantime, I will be waiting excitedly for the newest edition of this excellent reference.

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[Return to Front Page](#)