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Strange Trips: Science, Culture, and the Regulation of Drugs by Lucas Richert

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Abstract

In *Strange Trips: Science, Culture, and the Regulation of Drugs*, Lucas Richert sets out to “investigate the myths, meanings and boundaries of certain recreational drugs and pharmaceuticals,” a goal motivated by the call to “move beyond examining substances in silos” and “put drugs in conversation with each other.” The book’s theme is bolstered by wide-ranging and thorough research across such diverse media as medical journals, political speeches, pop culture, and news reports, with an investigative dive showcasing Richert’s expertise as a historian of pharmacology. *Strange Trips*’ ambitious scope—from the use of heroin as an end-of-life painkiller to the American public’s obsession with weight loss and the diet pills—sets the stage for a broad discussion as to the role and meaning of drug use and abuse in the North American context. Ultimately, *Strange Trips* serves as an excellent introductory text to the socio-political dimensions of drug regulation in Canada and the United States and is a readable resource for anyone interested in the politics of drug regulation.

Book Review

***Strange Trips: Science, Culture, and the Regulation of Drugs* by Lucas Richert¹**IRMAK AYDEMIR²

In *Strange Trips: Science, Culture, and the Regulation of Drugs*, Lucas Richert sets out to “investigate the myths, meanings and boundaries of certain recreational drugs and pharmaceuticals,” a goal motivated by the call to “move beyond examining substances in silos” and “put drugs in conversation with each other.”³ The book’s theme is bolstered by wide-ranging and thorough research across such diverse media as medical journals, political speeches, pop culture, and news reports, with an investigative dive showcasing Richert’s expertise as a historian of pharmacology. *Strange Trips’* ambitious scope—from the use of heroin as an end-of-life painkiller to the American public’s obsession with weight loss and the diet pills—sets the stage for a broad discussion as to the role and meaning of drug use and abuse in the North American context. Ultimately, *Strange Trips* serves as an excellent introductory text to the socio-political dimensions of drug regulation in Canada and the United States and is a readable resource for anyone interested in the politics of drug regulation.

Strange Trips’ greatest contribution to the literature on the history of pharmacology may be its engagement with and accessible exposition of primary source material. Across its three sections, *Strange Trips* draws on committee reports, scientific journals, and press releases to illustrate the complexities underlying drug regulation policy and the shifting tides of public opinion. The

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1. (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018).
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 3. Richert, *supra* note 1 at 4 [emphasis omitted].

result is a manuscript that moves beyond common references to drugs in popular culture and beyond references to “*Reefer Madness*, Harry J. Anslinger, or ... Bob Marley,”⁴ to situate at a macroscopic level the various factors that influence and mould drug policy. Unrestricted by a narrow focus on a particular decade, class of drugs, or country, *Strange Trips*’ engagement with primary sources illustrates the influence of the United Kingdom’s medical community on the legislatures of Canada and the United States over the past century; reveals the political nature of drug research funding; and brings to the fore tensions between public health concerns and the industry of drug sales, to list but three of the book’s contributions.

Crucially, *Strange Trips* is highly readable throughout: Rather than tailor the language of his dense research to meet the needs of an expert in the field, Richert writes with an eye to the average interested reader. *Strange Trips* favours readily accessible language over technical language, a welcome decision for a text that, in part, describes the chemical makeup of drugs and their various medical effects. Richert also works to situate the unfamiliar in the well-known. For instance, in discussing the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) role in drug regulation during the AIDS crisis, Richert borrows from depictions of the FDA in the film *Dallas Buyers Club* to dispel notions of the organization as a mere “cardboard villain” that frustrated informed patient groups that were battling for end-of-life relief.⁵ Mindful attention to audience is consistent and apparent throughout *Strange Trips* and the dense research of its contents is manageable and highly enjoyable to read as a result.

For all its merits, *Strange Trips* nevertheless suffers from two flaws that dull its impact. One flaw is in its organization. Though Richert’s expert research is presented as a unified monograph, *Strange Trips* may have been better presented as a collection of stand-alone essays sorted under headings that signal unifying themes. The book’s three Parts and several chapters make explicit reference to each other only rarely; connections between the trajectories of different drugs in the public, political, and medical arenas are only occasionally drawn. It’s a wonder why the book’s first section on “End-of-Life Medicines” isn’t subsumed under Parts two or three, which discuss when drugs breach “the barrier of drug legitimacy” and when they “can be jolted from a position of acceptance,” respectively.⁶ Placing the first section of the book under either of the latter two sections may have made greater editorial sense: In discussing the use of heroin or Laetrile for end-of-life relief, Richert discusses perceptions of the drugs’ benefits

4. *Ibid* at 15 [emphasis in original].

5. *Ibid* at 57.

6. *Ibid* at 15-16; see also *ibid* at 79, 121.

and relative dangers, themes that re-emerge and feature dominantly in the two sections that follow and that are dedicated to such a discussion. As it stands, it is only upon a second read that an average reader may find themselves capable of connecting the dots between the discussion of Laetrile in chapter two and the exploration of obesity and the diet pill in chapter seven. The book's pillars, laid out in the introduction, do little to help navigate such substantive complexity: Richert effectively promises and delivers a manuscript that shows how "the popularity and use of drugs ebbs and flows."⁷ However, contrary to the author's aim, it often feels like each drug is discussed in a silo. In this sense, *Strange Trips'* broad scope serves as a double-edged sword: It provides the benefit of breadth but compromises the flow of its overarching narrative.

Within sections, chapters tackle discrete cases: heroin and Laetrile in the first section; LSD and cannabin the second; and the American pharmaceutical industry, quick-fix diet pills, and ketamine in the final section. Though instructive as individual works of their own, chapters are sometimes bogged down by transitions that are blunt and jarring. For instance, the move from the chapter on the American regulation of cheaper, Canadian-imported drugs to the chapter on diet pills is made in a single, abrupt sentence at the end of a paragraph summarizing the United States' closed distribution system. Similarly, subheadings within chapters sometimes fail to organize chapter contents helpfully. Richert's discussion of heroin, for example, briefly reviews the drug's history in the United States from 1874 to the Nixon administration in the 1970s under one subheading, then discusses heroin advocacy and resistance under another before returning to a late 1980s discussion of the drug under a conclusionary subheading.

To organize the entirety of Richert's research chronologically would have surely meant a drier read; in fairness to him, the book is organized so as to avoid "proceed[ing] in a uniformly chronological fashion" and Richert states openly that the book does not "employ linear argumentation."⁸ Still, sorting through the information contained in *Strange Trips'* pages is oftentimes made difficult without a chronological flow, and Richert would have benefitted from drawing a greater number of explicit connections between and within chapters, and between and within sections, to truly "put drugs in conversation with one another."⁹

The other flaw dulling *Strange Trips'* impact is substantive. Despite centering much of the debate about drugs and pharmaceuticals around the patients who stand to benefit from them, Richert seldom quotes from patients or activists,

7. *Ibid* at 8.

8. *Ibid* at 13.

9. *Ibid* at 4.

instead expounding the views of prominent professionals and politicians. For instance, US Representative Steven D. Symms, who “sought to legalize Laetrile nationally and curtail the authority of the FDA,” is discussed as a figure who “propounded a growing view that bureaucrats in the agency lacked compassion for patients,”¹⁰ though the patients themselves are given no space to provide their own views. Admittedly, *Strange Trips* never promises to engage extensively with what questions preoccupy the normative backdrop of drug regulation: Richert’s text is not designed to defend an argument in favour of deregulation, unobstructed patient autonomy, or the like, so largely omitting patient perspectives doesn’t detract much. In the context of its own goals, however, the scarcity of patient perspectives in the text is striking. Since Richert invites readers to consider which medicines ought to be consumed at the end of life, and whether certain therapies meet the needs of the dying, failing to offer the perspectives of such individuals in any great detail is telling.¹¹ This is not to suggest that Richert fails to address questions such as these throughout *Strange Trips*, but that he does so predominantly from the perspectives of medical experts, interested politicians, and the occasional advocacy group like the International Association of Cancer Victims and Friends.¹² The reader who values greatly the role of patient viewpoints in medical discussions is likely to find this feature of *Strange Trips* disappointing; the reader who prefers to reflect on the viewpoints of professionals is likely to find it refreshing.

Overall, despite an oft-confusing organizational structure and a narrative that prioritizes professional standpoints over patient opinions, *Strange Trips* is an excellent resource for the reader looking for a thorough birds-eye view introduction to the politics of drug regulation. The book is comprehensive, accessible, and expertly researched, as well as topical—especially in the era of cannabis legalization in Canada and some American states, and the opioid crisis in large parts of North America. Readers looking for a more argumentative stance should look elsewhere; those who are content to review an expert’s synthesis of available research should not pass on *Strange Trips*.

10. *Ibid* at 68.

11. *Ibid* at 7.

12. See *ibid* at 71.