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A Moderately Gay History

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A MODERATELY GAY HISTORY

Henry Abelove

The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America by Margot Canaday. Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America series. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 296, 6 illustrations. \$29.95 cloth.

This book is novel and bold. It is also tediously overly detailed. Some of the detail should surely have been consigned to articles in specialist journals and left there. Despite the dense underbrush of particulars and instances, though, the overall argument stands out clearly and deserves close attention.

In very summary form, the argument is this: During the era stretching from early in the twentieth century to the cold war, the American state grew in power and reach. During these same years, the newly discovered notion of homosexuality, developed by sexologists, “exploded on the American continent.” These two developments, operating “in tandem” (2) led federal bureaucrats to endeavor to regulate and police homosexuality. At first their regulatory and policing work was “anemic.” They still lacked a clear analytical basis for dealing with what they saw as “the problem” of homosexuality, and they tried to get at it, without targeting it specifically, through broad rulings on matters such as “poverty, disorder, violence, or crime.” Gradually, however, as the federal bureaucrats became more numerous and influential, they also acquired a kind of “conceptual mastery” over the homosexuality they wanted to regulate and police. Starting in the mid-1940s, they did target it specifically and “overtly” (3). This targeting helped to create

the homosexual “identity” (4) in the contemporary sense and also deprived those identified as homosexual of full entitlement to American citizenship. When American homosexual persons—whose identity was created, as Canaday maintains, in some considerable measure by the American state—came to organize and agitate in their own interests, their goal, never wholly abandoned, has been, and still is, the achievement of citizenship rights in full.

In representing the American state, Margot Canaday concentrates particularly on the armed services, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Veterans Administration (VA), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Her treatment of the armed services owes much to previous work by Allan Berube and Leisa Meyer; on the INS, to previous work by Marc Stein and Shannon Minter; and on New Deal and post–World War II welfare policy, to work by a host of feminist historians, perhaps especially Lizabeth Cohen. But Canaday’s findings are nevertheless saliently new in several ways. First, she directs attention away from the 1940s and 1950s, long a focus of study on the American state assault on homosexuality, to the early years of the twentieth century. It was then, she says, that U.S. federal bureaucrats commenced their efforts to regulate homosexuality,

sometimes inclining to tolerance, sometimes to severity. And she insists that only by comprehending what the bureaucrats did then, in those years of diffuse regulation, can we hope to understand adequately the far more targeted regulation and policing of the later period. Second, Canaday significantly revises the major conclusions of feminist historiography on New Deal and post–World War II welfare policy. This historiography demonstrated that welfare policy advantaged men while it disadvantaged women, that it was in effect sexist. Canaday demonstrates that it was heterosexist, as well. Third and perhaps most important, Canaday brings to her inquiry a firm grasp of the ideas of modern political science concerning state bureaucracy—how it operates, how it acquires and copes with new knowledge in the course of daily work. In deploying these ideas to explain what she sees as the paced conceptual development of the American state regulation of homosexuality, she does something entirely fresh.

All these novelties are fascinating. Yet some irksome questions remain. Why should we simply accept that the federal bureaucrats developed, in considerable measure created, the homosexual “identity” through their daily experience of the work of regulation? Why couldn’t their shifting conception of homosexuality have derived rather, or primarily, from

their experience of the shifting representations of it in the culture all around them—from fiction, poetry, film, journalism, advertisement? Canaday gives hardly any attention to shifts in cultural representations and doesn't ask how they may have influenced or even shaped concurrent shifts in bureaucratic perspective. Another question: Is the modern homosexual "identity"—whatever that may be—a distinctively American phenomenon? If it isn't, how much credence can we concede to an historical argument that gives so much weight to the force of a distinctively American state regime in the producing of that "identity?"

On one crucial issue, Canaday's argument is mistaken. A full entitlement to American citizenship hasn't always been a goal or even a desideratum for gay politics. Canaday traces a poignant continuity of interest in transforming federal policy from the "earliest of homophobic protests" (262) through the 1979 National March on Washington through the federal civil rights bill proposed by the National Gay Task Force and up to and including the present-day struggle for equality for LGBTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer) people in the American armed services. All this is true, but there is a countertradition, too—a countertradition of LGBTQ agitators who never hoped to declaim *Civis Romanus sum*. This countertradition

includes many LGBTQ antistatist anarchists. It also includes most of the American gay liberationists of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For these liberationists, America was typically understood to be actually *Amerika*. To share in it, to belong to it fully, was immeasurably less important to them than to express their vehement disaffection from it and to adequately explain the grounds and reasons of their disaffection. For them, as for many others of their contemporaries, the 1960s had been, as the historian Marilyn Young puts it, "centrally about the recognition . . . that the country in which they thought they lived—peaceful, generous, honorable—did not exist and never had."¹

Henry Abelove, the author of Deep Gossip (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), is Osborne Professor of English and Professor of American Studies at Wesleyan University.

NOTE

1. Marilyn Young, foreword to *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–14, quotation on 3.