
In *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America*, Margot Canaday offers what she terms a “social history of the state” by describing how federal institutions constituted sexual identity in the process of establishing the boundaries of national citizenship. Canaday identifies three arms of the federal government that frame her depiction of the coterminous processes of sexual identity categorization and American state-building: the Bureau of Immigration, the military, and the federal agencies that administered welfare benefits. Canaday argues against the thesis that homosexuality was strictly repressed only after gays and lesbians became very visible after World War II. According to Canaday, the state did not, “simply encounter homosexual citizens, fully formed and wanting to be counted, classified, administered, or disciplined.”\(^1\) Rather, Canaday gives a longer historical narrative of federal regulation of homosexuality and an account of the bureaucratization of homosexuality as it was forged through legal and administrative processes. Canaday stresses that the result of this slow growth of state regulation helped to foster a homosexual identity and to create a homosexual-heterosexual binary of citizenship that excluded homosexuals while reifying the heterosexual and patriarchal nuclear family.

The book is divided into two parts, the first, “Nascent Policing,” includes the first three chapters. In the first chapter, Canaday describes the federal government’s early encounters with, and reactionary policing of, sexual deviance as a “complex dialectic of discovery and creation.”\(^2\)

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2 Ibid., 53.
By exploring the Bureau of Immigration’s efforts to exclude degenerates and “perverts” from the United States, Canaday illustrates the government’s inchoate understanding of and haphazard policing of sexual perversion. In chapter 2, Canaday shifts her focus to the military and chronicles the introduction of the psychological and psychiatric expert in matters of sexual perversion. By the 1920s, psychiatrists understood perversion as the marker of a psychopathic personality and were often called to testify in martial courts to certify one’s psychopathic status. Canaday also describes an important shift in the regulation of homosexual activity in the military as martial courts began prosecuting both individuals engaged in a homosexual act as opposed to only penalizing one guilty sexual pervert. This policy criminalized sexual acts between men.

Chapter 3 is primarily centered on Depression-era “state created enclaves of male intimacy,” namely, the Federal Transient Program (FTP) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Canaday emphasizes that in this era single men and women were outliers in the New Deal family bread-winning model. Canaday explained that transiency was often associated with nonmarital sexuality and sexual perversion, therefore these federal programs, the FTP to a much greater extent, were subject to suspicion of being hotbeds for homosexual activity and other forms of sexual deviance. Further evidence of the federal government’s investment in the family bread-winning model was the gendered two-track welfare system. On one hand, single men were entitled to public assistance and on the other, single women received very little assistance, which made their condition undesirable.

Part II of the book, “Explicit Regulation,” includes the last three chapters. In Chapter 4, Canaday sustains her argument regarding the institutionalization of heterosexuality in her discussion of the GI bill. State officials determined that veterans discharged from the army due to their homosexuality were ineligible to receive benefits. This is evidence of Canaday’s claim that
people coded as homosexual are essentially excluded from the citizenry. At this point, according to Canaday, the homosexual-heterosexual binary emerges in federal welfare policy. The fifth chapter examines the policing of lesbianism in the cold war military. Canaday argues that the regulation of female sexuality was the final element in the shaping of our twenty-first century conception of homosexuality—“a homosexuality that reveals itself not only through sexual acts and gender inversion, but in the architecture of relationships, culture and community.”

Antilesbian repression in the military was significant because it served to reinforce a gendered hierarchy by prosecuting certain behavior among women that challenged prevailing gender roles. Canaday closes the narrative with a discussion of immigration policy in the 1950s. She illustrates the process by which homosexuality becomes understood as a legal construct. As medical experts became more reluctant to certify homosexuality as the mark of a mental disability, homosexuality came to be defined solely by federal law. At that point, according to Canaday, homosexuality was “forged not only by a consolidation of acts and status, but also by a convergence of other markers as well (such as mannishness in women and effeminacy in men) that demonstrated a propensity to commit a homosexual act.” Canaday concludes that homosexual identity and modern citizenship “crystallized” alongside the manifestation of an American federal bureaucracy. She claims that the federal government played the most significant role in defining homosexuality because (as she attempted to show through her examination of the INS, the military, and welfare agencies) homosexuality was defined in the process of establishing boundaries around national citizenship.

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3 Ibid., 178.
4 Ibid., 253.
5 Ibid., 255.
This is a well-research and insightful book, but is not without problems. It is possible that Canaday overemphasized the federal government’s role in forming national opinion at the expense of understanding how the society at large shaped notions of sexual identity. To what extent could the federal institutions have been simply inscribing existing cultural attitudes into their legislation? In addition, race is almost entirely excluded from the book. The family bread-winning model was not only heterosexual and patriarchal, it was also primarily white. Canaday does not grapple with the fact that contested identities without the realm of sexuality played a role in the establishment of boundaries around national citizenship and that the categories of ‘noncitizen’ are far from mutually exclusive.

Finally, three separate federal institutions serve as the analytical units for Canaday’s argument. This assemblage allows Canaday to make claims about the parameters of national citizenship, however she fails to establish continuity between these institutions. Canaday makes it clear in the introduction that she is interested in locating and illuminating the actions of particular agents in the state-building project. However, the fact that she has dismantled “the state” into a disparate group of institutions and failed to prove a shared interest between them weakens her broader claim that the federal government harnesses national values and expresses them through federal policy. Overall, these critiques do not diminish the significance of Canaday’s argument about state intervention in the construction of social norms and values.