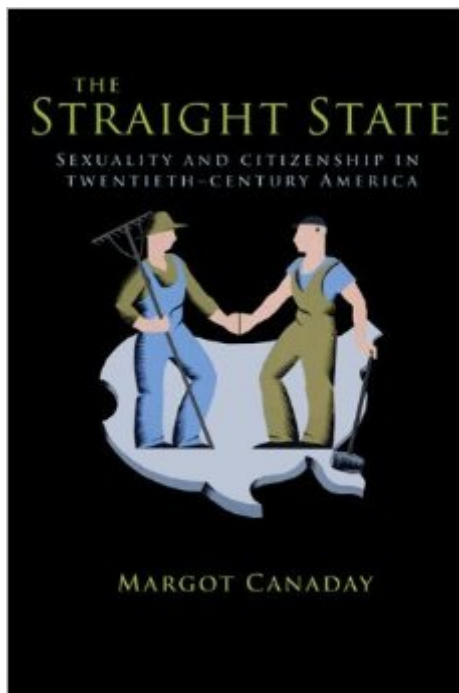


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The Straight State: Sexuality And Citizenship In Twentieth-Century America (Politics And Society In Modern America)



Synopsis

The Straight State is the most expansive study of the federal regulation of homosexuality yet written. Unearthing startling new evidence from the National Archives, Margot Canaday shows how the state systematically came to penalize homosexuality, giving rise to a regime of second-class citizenship that sexual minorities still live under today. Canaday looks at three key arenas of government control--immigration, the military, and welfare--and demonstrates how federal enforcement of sexual norms emerged with the rise of the modern bureaucratic state. She begins at the turn of the twentieth century when the state first stumbled upon evidence of sex and gender nonconformity, revealing how homosexuality was policed indirectly through the exclusion of sexually "degenerate" immigrants and other regulatory measures aimed at combating poverty, violence, and vice. Canaday argues that the state's gradual awareness of homosexuality intensified during the later New Deal and through the postwar period as policies were enacted that explicitly used homosexuality to define who could enter the country, serve in the military, and collect state benefits. Midcentury repression was not a sudden response to newly visible gay subcultures, Canaday demonstrates, but the culmination of a much longer and slower process of state-building during which the state came to know and to care about homosexuality across many decades. Social, political, and legal history at their most compelling, The Straight State explores how regulation transformed the regulated: in drawing boundaries around national citizenship, the state helped to define the very meaning of homosexuality in America.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Distilling an impressive amount of archival research, this book traces the gradual refinement (if that is the appropriate term) of antihomosexual policies on the part of the US federal government over the course of the twentieth century. Three areas are addressed: immigration, the military, and welfare. Not discussed are the baneful effects of state and local governments, as seen in such areas as entrapment and compulsory treatment of perceived mental disorders. In addition, the author offers only a brief discussion of the McCarthyite persecution of federal employees of the 1950s, holding that that has been covered in David K. Johnson's book. Now in my seventies, I remember the horrendously homophobic atmosphere of mid-century America all too well. To be sure, "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church"; that is, many of us became activists because we wanted to bring an end to these practices. That said, it is mistaken to suggest, as Canaday does, that the homophobic climate of the era was unique to the US. To be sure, some European countries, such as France and Italy, benefiting from the Code Napoleon, did better. But the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China were worse. Probably, the atmosphere that we endured was a special characteristic of the English-speaking peoples. While England and Wales decriminalized in 1967, over forty Commonwealth countries are still saddled with antisodomy legislation introduced by British colonialism. In countries like Jamaica and Uganda this heritage is accompanied by truly frightening popular outbreaks of bigotry and repression. Another problem is the residue of the special creationism of the Social Construction trend of the 1990s. "The state . . .

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