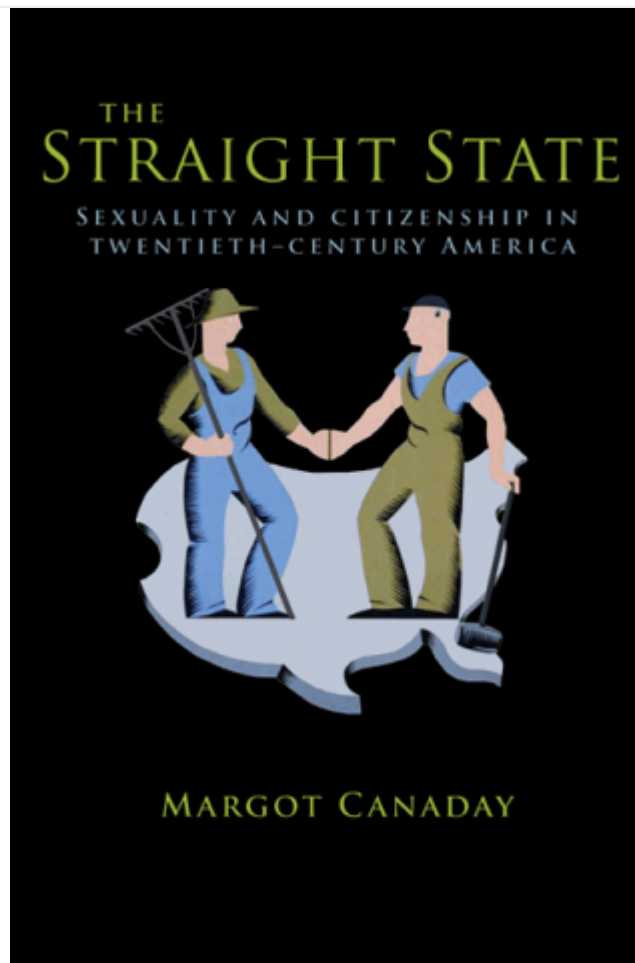


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The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America. By Margot Canaday (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). Pp. 296. Cloth, \$29.95.

The Straight State is one of a growing number of books that examines the categorization and treatment of homosexuals in the United States during the twentieth century. It builds on the existing historiography of sexuality by demonstrating how federal policies repressed and bureaucratized homosexuals through categorization. Other books in this historiography include: Ronald Bayer's *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry*, Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out Under Fire*, and Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed*.^[1] Margot Canaday studies the treatment of homosexuals by the military, immigration officials, welfare agencies, and the interplay of the state and sexuality. She argues that "federal interest in homosexuality developed in tandem with the growth of the bureaucratic state" (2).

From the turn of the century until the 1940s, the federal government struggled to regulate homosexuality because of its ability to be concealed and the lack of laws specifically targeted at it. Instead, it was attacked by general provisions in policies. Immigration officials attempted to reject or deport homosexuals based on poverty, criminal history, or fear that they would become a burden to the state. These charges were difficult to substantiate and did not prevent homosexuals from immigrating. The military classified homosexuals as perverts with mental illnesses and therefore unfit for service. However, this policy failed because of its vague definition of perversion, a lack of qualified psychiatrists to evaluate entrants, and the ability of recruits to hide their homosexuality. As a result, homosexual acts and relationships frequently occurred, which the military blamed on the influence of libidinous civilians and punished through court martials, dishonorable discharges, and imprisonment, all of which were unsuccessful in ridding offenders of their homosexuality. Before the Great Depression, welfare regulations prevented floaters, transient men, from obtaining benefits because many in this group were thought to be homosexuals. As the number of floaters increased because of the depression, the government created programs, such as the Civilian

Conservation Corps (CCC) and Federal Transient Program (FTP), to provide floaters with jobs. The CCC was portrayed as an opportunity for responsible men to contribute to society because a portion of their income was sent to dependents, such as wives or friends, casting them in the traditional male provider role while men in the FTP were seen as vagrants, sexual deviants and drifters. Regardless of public perception, homosexuality occurred openly at these single-sex work sites demonstrating the ineffectiveness of classification based on stereotypes.

As the federal bureaucracy continued to grow in the second half of the century, its ability to regulate homosexuality expanded. It also created sexual identities by setting forth specific criteria to determine who was a homosexual. After World War II, the military conducted witch hunts for lesbians in its ranks. Lesbians were determined by their haircut, clothing, relationships with other women, tendencies, or decisions to become a careerist, because all these traits shunned traditional heterosexual orthodoxies and defined lesbianism as a problem for the state. The lesbians discovered by the military helped to shape the federal definition of homosexuality through detailed confessions to investigators, which documented their lifestyle. The Immigration and Nationalization Service (INS) regulated the entrance of homosexuals under the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 that allowed for the exclusion and deportation of immigrants with psychopathic personalities, including homosexuality, painting it as a psychological problem subject to a variety of definitions. This vagueness led to legal challenges; the INS was forced to rely on differing state laws to determine the ramifications of ambiguous charges, such as disorderly conduct. Further confusion was caused by the disjointed opinions of medical professionals, many of whom argued that homosexuality was not problematic. The welfare system denied the benefits of the Veterans Administration and the G.I. Bill to soldiers who were given less than honorable discharges because of a suspicion of homosexuality. This practice sparked a debate in Congress that forced a reevaluation of the discharge system and restricted eligibility for benefits.

The Straight State demonstrates how the government's policies both regulated and defined homosexuality. Canaday's thorough research details the creation of a heterosexual/homosexual binary that privileged heterosexuality based on homophobia and stereotyping. She explains

why and how the growing state regulated homosexuality. Her use of anecdotal evidence enlivens the narrative by putting a human face on its subjects, rather than depicting them as cases or statistics.

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[1] Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990); and Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



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