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BOOK REVIEWS

Struggles for Citizenship: Gender, Sexuality, and the State (Then and Now)

Margot Canaday. *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xiv + 277 pp. ISBN 069-113598-3 (cl); 978-0-691-14993-6 (pb).

Robert O. Self. *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012. viii + 518 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-8090-9502-5 (cl).

Leigh Ann Wheeler. *How Sex Became a Civil Liberty*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiv + 327 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-19-975423-6 (cl).

Natasha Zaretsky

Contemporary gender and sexual politics in the United States are riven by paradox. The Defense of Marriage Act and “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” are dead, the fight for marriage equality has advanced more quickly than even the most optimistic forecasters could have predicted, and women continue to make inroads in virtually every arena of public and professional life. Yet queer people remain vulnerable to violence, women’s reproductive freedom is under attack, and the steady march of neo-liberal privatization hurts poor women and women-of-color the most. Even though our Twitter feeds and Facebook pages are filled with online petition drives on behalf of progressive causes, the mass movements of the 1960s feel remote and out of reach. That Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*—a how-to manual for women in the business world—could be hailed as a feminist manifesto highlights a troubling collusion between feminism and corporate capitalism, while also signaling just how straightjacketed our conceptions of emancipation have become.

The three books under review shed new light on current issues by placing gender, sex, and sexuality at the center of the modern history of American citizenship. Robert Self asks how the symbol of the breadwinner—once at the heart of mid-century liberalism—became the property of political conservatism after 1968. Leigh Ann Wheeler looks at how and why sexual expression and sexual practices became recognized as fundamental civil rights. Margot Canaday, finally, seeks to understand the American state’s comparative weakness and its heterosexism vis-à-vis other Western

democracies in the early twentieth century. Taken together, all three books accomplish what histories of gender and sexuality do at their best: show how constitutive the ostensibly "private" worlds of sex, masculinity, femininity, queerness, straightness, and family life have been to the ostensibly "public" worlds of American citizenship, politics, and statehood.

In *All in the Family*, Robert Self reveals the centrality of the gendered figure of the breadwinner—a male worker who could support his family—to the mid-century liberal project. The architects of the New Deal and the Great Society hoped to bring this ideal and the financial security that attended it within reach of more and more Americans. Yet by the early twenty-first century, the male breadwinner and the traditional family had become conservative emblems, as politicians on the right replaced an earlier New Deal promise to provide the family with economic security with a promise to protect it from moral threats. The consequence, Self suggests, was the wholesale realignment of American politics after 1968. How did this happen?

Self offers a largely compelling answer. By the late 1960s, the liberal incarnation of the breadwinner was under political, economic, and cultural strain. The insurgencies of the era—feminism, gay liberation, and black freedom—demanded a more capacious conception of citizenship. "The breadwinner," "the soldier," "the heterosexual," "the woman": these were not fixed categories, but instead were open to contestation. As newly politicized constituencies remade the Democratic Party, the earlier liberal fight for economic security was decoupled from the figure of the male breadwinner in light of new demands for women's equality in the labor market, for reproductive and sexual freedom, and for an end to heterosexism. One consequence was the erosion of a Democratic Party architecture that relied on appeals to the patriarchal male-headed family. According to Self, white men who had once dominated the liberal coalition were becoming its "weak underbelly" (303). By the early 1970s, this shift was compounded by the economic challenges of stagnation, unemployment, and deindustrialization. The nuclear family—always more a normative ideal than a universal reality—was becoming economically unsustainable as the patriarchal structures that undergirded it were coming under assault.

It was here that conservatives saw an opportunity and seized it. Grasping that an earlier Democratic consensus was breaking down, they strategically repositioned themselves as champions of the traditional, male-headed family, which they contended was now under threat, not from a faltering economy but from feminism, gay liberation, and racial upheaval. Politicians like George Wallace and Richard Nixon wooed disaffected white men toward the right by appealing to patriotic manhood, while also tapping into resentments among the white working classes. Over the course of the 1970s, the growing political influence of conservative Christianity facilitated this

process, as religious leaders linked the moral degeneration of the family to the decline of the nation. The cumulative effect was the eclipse of an earlier breadwinner liberalism by an ascendant breadwinner conservatism. On the surface, the latter mimicked the former in its championing of male earners and their nuclear families. But the two were profoundly different: liberals had mobilized the breadwinner ideal to demand economic security, while post-1968 conservatives contended that the most dire threats facing the family were moral and cultural. The breadwinner ideal was thus stripped of its earlier social welfare dimension. What had historically been aligned with an activist model of government would now be linked to its opposite: the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state.

Self's argument is convincing, in part because he shows how the political potency of the family lay in its capacity to encompass both cultural and economic questions. After 1968, conservatives intuitively understood this and were able to portray the family as under threat from both cultural forces and a welfare state that, in their view, hurt the very families it was intended to help. The breadwinner ideal thus enabled conservatives to wage a "culture war" in which they championed traditional family values, while advancing economic policies that rendered actual families vulnerable to the vagaries of a deregulated, free market economy.

The problem with Self's analysis is that it overstates both conservative success and liberal defeat. The liberal tradition—at least with regard to its gender and family politics—now lies in tatters, while conservative domination is all but complete. The contemporary reality, however, is more complicated. The Republican attacks on contraception and abortion during the 2012 election attest to the endurance of the culture wars. Indeed, that these issues would figure so prominently in an election that occurred in the midst of a stubborn economic recession supports Self's thesis that gender and family haunt contemporary U.S. political culture. But the outcome of that election reveals just how out-of-step the Republican Party has become with most voters on these issues. Nor can Self's conclusions be reconciled with the stunning progress on the marriage equality front. When viewed alongside the progression of marriage equality, the conservative championing of "traditional family values" looks more like a rearguard action than a victory.

So why does Self's otherwise convincing historical argument fail to square with the present? Part of the explanation has to do with Self's premise that neoliberalism and political conservatism were aligned in their attack on social welfare spending. This is true, but it is only part of the story. Neoliberalism was also aligned with the gender and sexual revolutions of the 1960s. As scholars like the historian Thomas Borstelmann have argued, neoliberalism (and deindustrialization) actually *entailed* the shattering of

traditional racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies.¹ The male breadwinner model would prove incompatible with a more flexible, service-based workforce that was multiracial, multinational, and gender inclusive. Without denying the role played by feminist and gay insurgents, it is neoliberalism's dismantling of traditional hierarchies that helps explain the dramatic and irreversible changes in gender and familial relations initiated in the 1960s. These changes are evinced not only in the fight for marriage equality, but also in the ways that sharply differentiated gender roles have become less relevant within heterosexual marriage.

While Self presents a gloomy picture, Leigh Ann Wheeler appears more sanguine about the contemporary state of sexual politics. Her book *How Sex Became a Civil Liberty* explores how sexual expression and practice came to be seen as fundamental to the American civil liberties regime—so fundamental, in fact, that these rights are largely taken for granted today. Drawing on both archival sources and oral history interviews, Wheeler provides a detailed organizational history of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). She pays close attention to both the cultural milieus of its leaders and the major court decisions that created the legal grammar of sexual civil liberty. From the beginning, the organization was bound up with the expansion of sexual freedom, since a number of its founders came out of the bohemian sexual experimentation of early twentieth century Greenwich Village. In 1921, the organization was a year old when it offered its support to Margaret Sanger, who had been arrested by New York City police and charged with “disorderly conduct” for hosting a meeting on birth control. The Sanger case exemplified the organization's early focus on freedom of sexual expression. Most early ACLU leaders maintained that they had no interest in the issue of birth control; rather, they sought to protect the freedoms of assembly and speech. Their cause gained momentum after World War II. The Cold War stigmatized censorship as anathema to a democratic society, and a burgeoning consumer culture fostered the idea that the First Amendment should protect both producers *and* consumers of speech. Recognition of the consumer's fundamental right to “read, see, and hear” within a robust public sphere was critical to the postwar emergence of a sexual civil liberties architecture linked to what the historian Lizabeth Cohen has called “consumer citizenship.”²

In the 1960s and 1970s, the ACLU gradually—and sometimes reluctantly—moved from “speech” to “practice.” That is, it expanded its mission beyond a defense of free sexual expression to a defense of the rights of citizens to engage in consensual sexual practices and to exercise reproductive freedom. While the protection of speech entailed a championing of an open public sphere, the protecting of practices hinged on a vigorous defense of the right to privacy from unreasonable state intrusion. The taking of birth

control; protection from forced sterilization; obtaining an abortion; engaging in consensual homosexual sex: the ACLU came to recognize that violations of these rights were as unconstitutional as restrictions on speech. Wheeler points out that the ACLU came to this recognition slowly and sometimes had to be prodded along. Feminists, reproductive rights advocates, and gay rights activists pushed the organization to expand beyond its earlier purview, and it was often the ACLU's local affiliates that were on the vanguard of controversial issues. But while the ACLU learned much from them, these activists were simultaneously empowered by the organization's grammar of sexual civil liberties. This is not to say that the ACLU and movements like feminism always marched in step. Indeed, some of the book's most absorbing material describes the moments when provisional alliances broke down: feminist opponents of pornography condemned the ACLU, and the politics of rape law proved especially thorny as the ACLU's historical attention to the rights of defendants was challenged by a feminist attention to the rights of rape victims. The overall picture, however, is one of a diverse array of actors collaboratively creating what Wheeler describes as a "broad consensus on the sanctity of freedom of speech and sexual privacy" (224).

But how solid is this "broad consensus"? We are living through a frightening moment in the history of the abortion wars. Women's health care providers are harassed, clinics that provide abortions are being shuttered, late-term abortions are being banned, ultrasounds are being mandated for pregnant women who seek abortions, and physicians are being required to give these same women literature that details the anatomical features of the fetus. These are egregious violations of the right to privacy, and they beg the question of whether the ACLU's championing of privacy rights has gone far enough. Wheeler does point to lost opportunities within the organization; some leaders urged the ACLU to embrace the position that the government had a responsibility to fund family planning services. In the absence of such direct social provision, critics insisted, "equality under the law" would remain rhetorical. That position was rebuffed, creating a political opening for anti-choice opponents. If abortion opponents could not win the war of public opinion, they could win at the state and local levels by slashing government funds for facilities that provided abortion. The current state of affairs speaks to the limits of appeals to "the right to privacy" while also suggesting that Wheeler's consensus is more fragile than it might appear.

If the studies by Wheeler and Self illuminate the history of modern liberalism, Margot Canaday's *The Straight State* shows how deeply that liberalism was predicated on sexual exclusion. Canaday asks: "How did a state that was so late in coming construct such a vast apparatus for policing homosexuality, and why?" (2). The answer has everything to do with

timing. Precisely because the American welfare state developed later than its Western counterparts, its bureaucracy matured as the field of sexology was entering scientific and popular awareness. During the early twentieth century, the contemporary binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality did not exist; the operative yet murky distinction in the first decades of the twentieth century was instead between perversion and normalcy. Bureaucrats within the Bureau of Immigration, the military, and the welfare state "puzzled over" the problem of perversion as they counted and classified their subjects. Canaday charts the process by which these bureaucrats came to know and produce what we would today recognize as the category of "the homosexual."

The story she tells is gripping and at times heartbreaking. Progressive-era immigration officials used a "public charge clause" to exclude or deport aliens who exhibited gender inversion or had engaged in sodomy. In the World War I military, officials feared that "sex perverts" might taint the reputations of the army and navy, even as they lacked sufficient tools for punishment. During the 1930s, the New Deal Federal Transient Program (FTP) was stigmatized by charges of perversion because it sought to assist "floaters"—transient men who lacked ties to families. The termination of the program, which provided relief outside the channels of marriage and reproduction, signaled what Canaday describes as a "foreclosure in the landscape of American social provision" (130).

By the end of World War II, homosexual exclusion from citizenship rights became more overt, and the binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality was coming into view. In 1945, the Veterans Administration barred soldiers who had been administratively discharged for "homosexual acts or tendencies" from receiving the benefits of the GI Bill, a move that enshrined heterosexist bias into the very foundation of the postwar welfare state. During the Cold War, the military vastly increased its anti-lesbian investigations, revealing anxiety about the permanent presence of women soldiers, and the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act barred entry into the United States to aliens afflicted with psychopathic personality. While earlier immigrant officials had tried to use the preexistent "public charge clause" to police perversion at the nation's borders, the 1952 law was something new: the creation of a policy to keep homosexuals out of the country. The ironic consequence of this accretion of policies over the twentieth century was the construction of modern homosexuality *and* the systematic exclusion of homosexuals from a "straight state." The contemporary gay rights movement has held onto the baby while throwing out the bathwater. That is, it has elaborated on the construction of homosexual identity while fighting against its exclusion.

This is a near-flawless monograph. By looking at the first half of the twentieth century, it challenges a dominant periodization within LGBT history that interprets the state repression of gay men and lesbians in the late 1940s and 1950s as a reaction to their heightened visibility during World War II. In the process, it productively de-emphasizes the McCarthy era persecution of homosexuals by placing it within a longer history of state responses to sex and gender nonconformity. It reveals that homosexual exclusion intensified at the same time that the state was moving toward both greater enfranchisement of women and the dismantlement of Jim Crow. It shows how state bureaucrats helped to produce the category of homosexuality, while also demonstrating that the modern welfare state contained both a gendered *and* heterosexual matrix. Finally, it looks at the ironic origins of the gay rights movement, which both emerged out of the straight state and has bravely fought to dismantle it.

If all three books answer some key historical questions, they also raise new political ones that speak to our own time. What kind of “family politics” should progressives embrace, since there is no going back to breadwinner liberalism? What are the limits of a civil liberties approach in an age of growing economic inequality? And finally, is the securing of federal citizenship rights—particularly the rights enshrined within the institutions of marriage and the military—enough? Why have marriage and the military dominated the field of recent gay politics? One impulse is to answer the last question with another question: why shouldn’t they? After all, both play a crucial role as conduits of social provision. Another answer is that it is unfair to place the burden of critiquing state institutions on those formally excluded from the very rights those institutions accord. However, there was a moment in the 1970s when queers took that burden on. They rejected marriage as a patriarchal and heterosexist institution, and they saw their sexuality as a ground for rejecting U.S. imperialism and militarism. The history of the gay rights movement is not only a history of citizenship demands, in other words. It also encompassed people who used their pariah status as “anti-citizens” to imagine a different society altogether. As the edifice of the straight state gives way, let’s hope for the birth of a queer state that can allow all of us to do the same.

NOTES

¹Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).