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Book Review

The Sexual Constitution of Political Authority: the 'trials' of same sex desire

Aleardo Zanghellini, 2015

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This book is a fascinating and engaging read that will be of particular interest to socio-legal and legal historians, constitutional and political historians, and historians of sex and sexuality amongst others. Zanghellini's stated aim is to explore how political authority in Britain and its legitimacy has been culturally constructed and influenced by same-sex desire, limited in this context to homosexual same-sex desire for the entirely justifiable reasons given in respect of the relative denial of female engagement in political matters until more recent times. He tracks how this dynamic has changed and shifted through time and, more importantly, how it has problematized and undermined the inherent authority of state power, monarchical, governmental and parliamentary, attracting opprobrium and disapproval which in turn has typically generated public criticism and disavowal of such relationships. The evidence is presented through a series of richly detailed case studies based on the author's commanding knowledge and re-interpretation of a wide range of primary texts, popular literature, literary ephemera, contemporary and critical reviews etc., that analyse the relationships and assignments of certain powerful individuals including monarchs, politicians and public officials. These vignettes are convincingly used to significantly challenge and question some of the established historiographic literature and contemporary narratives of the era. Zanghellini interrogates a number of conventional and accepted historical perspectives demystifying the political intrigues and euphemistic representations of contemporary accounts associated with such relationships and events. In particular, he sets himself the task of examining the extent to which male same-sex desire has impacted upon what he terms the 'good exercise of public powers', a concept he defines as embracing the competency of individuals to carry out their public duties and responsibilities as well as their ability and willingness to do so.

The result is a remarkable and original thesis that through extensive investigation and re-visitation of critically accepted portraits and perceptions of a number of ubiquitous and powerful individuals now demands that some of their rulings, decisions and declarations be re-evaluated in the light of a more sensitive and nuanced understanding of the impact and influence of their sexual proclivities, relationships and desires. The title cleverly plays on both the political and sexual dynamics of such power relations with reference to the 'The Sexual Constitution of Political Authority', and on the legal and sexual dynamics – especially in the context of sexual discrimination and persecution – in 'the *'trials'* of same sex desire' [italics added]. The style is lively and Zanghellini's arguments persuasive but undoubtedly some writers will feel compelled to present counter-arguments or justify entrenched positions promoting further debate which is what any great book should facilitate. Zanghellini clearly expects such response and seeks to pre-empt any such assaults on some of the critiques he makes of the existing literature and discourse in the opening chapter. He strongly and painstakingly defends his thesis, carefully explaining and defining the parameters of his study and methodological approach which significantly draws on but also challenges Foucault's history of the present and revisitation of the past to re-examine the established narratives of the familiar stories covered.

Chronologically the book covers a timescale ranging from the Greco-Roman world to the obvious and expected endpoint – Wolfenden. The main body starts with a useful explanation of the intricacies and intimacies of same-sex desire as it existed in the ancient world comparing Athenian and Roman attitudes to masculinity and effeminacy in the political forum through the profiles of Alexander, Timarchus, Hadrian and Elagabalus. This sets the context for the subsequent chapters and justifies a significant leap fast-forwarding to the fourteenth century and a re-examination of the relationship between Edward II and his so-called 'blood

brother' Piers Gaveston as documented in the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*. It is here where Zanghellini first takes on a number of established views arguing, from his reading of the sources, that their relationship was more than simply platonic with sufficient ambiguity evident in the contemporary texts of the time to support an interpretation that it was in fact consummated - albeit not necessarily by the anticipated threshold of penetration. He uses this finding to challenge those who insist that the presence of same-sex desire must always necessarily equate to proof of full intercourse. Re-reading the sources in this way requires audacity as I know from my work on interpreting Victorian newspaper reports of sexual assault trials, here I found his method convincingly defended and would strongly support his approach.

Zanghellini confirms that Edward's reign was not popular because of his preferential treatment and patronage towards his male favourites which ultimately led to his execution and came to symbolise the dangers of same-sex desire and unacceptable correlation of pleasure and corruption. History is then seen to repeat itself as such attitudes were used to justify the criticism of James I as a weak King and one who could not match the glorianna of Elizabeth I. James' 'addictive' relationships with George Villiers and then Robert Carr echoed Edward's affairs and his frivolous and licentious sexual desires justified public criticism of his ill-informed decision making, generous religious tolerance and desire for a peaceful rather than combative resolution of the Thirty Years' war. But more significantly, Zanghellini uses the example of James to challenge the established view that 'gender marked' homosexuality (effeminacy v masculinity) developed in the eighteenth century, theorising that instead it emanated a century earlier with James representing 'a constitutional effeminacy' whose love of dress and lack of moral courage blinded him to the need to protect English interests over his more preferred (and as perceived by his advisors, deplorable,) Scottish and catholic associations.

The last two chapters offer examples from modernity although a brief retrospective contextual review explaining the shift from monarchical to democratic rule and from relative tolerance to criminalisation would have been useful. The shift to the universal 'unspeakability' and denial of homosexuality is presented through two nineteenth century scandals where the rhetoric of homosexuality and guilt by association was used by the press, politicians and others to attempt to discredit the government and political rivals invoking Labouchere's offensive warning that homosexuality was 'worse than murder'. Irish nationalists delightedly claimed that the 'homosexualization' of Dublin Castle not only highlighted the Empire's colonization of Ireland but undermined England's imperialistic masculinity. Radicals used the Cleveland Street scandal to suggest that the government could not be trusted as it would always act in a partisan manner and contrary to the rule of law in order to shield and protect its own.

The final chapter revisits the well-trodden shift towards decriminalization and Wolfenden analysed through the trials and conviction of the young peer, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and his dismissal from high public office at the hand of Maxwell-Fyfe and others. Zanghellini reflects on how the American Lavender Scare irrationally influenced official attempts to align the 'disorder' of homosexuality and its 'transgressions' with supposed Communistic tendencies and security risks during the Cold War. The postscript, based on their respective autobiographies, of Montagu's reinstatement contrasted with the Conservative MP Ian Harvey's trial for gross indecency reveals the intolerant and bigoted political atmosphere that made it impossible for such individuals to be able to reconcile their private and public lives. Entrenched establishment views die hard but recently there has been a massive shift in genuinely acknowledging and accepting diversity in public office: 32 lesbian, gay and bisexual MPs were elected in 2015, currently four of Scotland's five political leaders are LGB and with the appointment of Sir Terence Etherton as the first openly gay Master of the Rolls such indefensible and archaic sacred cows have been well and truly culled.