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Stacy Lorraine Braukman. *Communists and Perverts under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956-1965.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. xiii + 250 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3982-4.

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Prurience and Homophobia during the Red Scare

When the Florida legislature created a committee in 1956 to investigate organizations that advocated violations of state law, the clearly understood purpose was to brand the NAACP, the state's leading proponent of ending segregation, as communist-run and un-American. Using anticommunism to discredit the civil rights movement was hardly a new tactic during the McCarthy era, but the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC), or Johns Committee (named in honor of its sponsor, state senator Charley Johns) was conspicuously unsuccessful in its efforts to stigmatize or intimidate the NAACP.

So, seeking to maintain its political credibility and its funding, the committee soon turned its attention from the assumed evils of communism and race-mixing to those of homosexuality. It initiated a witch hunt that was unique in U.S. history for its combination of prurience, invasion of privacy, twisted moralism, and psychological ignorance. Stacy Braukman's *Communists and Perverts under the Palms,* despite its questionable title, provides a useful, straightforward account of the campaign.

The precedent for the Johns Committee's drive to expose gay men and lesbians, and in particular to drive them out of public employment (especially teaching) was the U.S. State Department's own purge, announced in February 1950 just a few days after Senator Joseph McCarthy made his famous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, charging that the department was infested with communists. The connection between homosexuality and communism was far from obvious, but in an era when gays were heavily closeted, the possibility of blackmail could pose a security threat; more importantly, in the morally repressive atmosphere of the time, very different sorts of allegedly subversive activities were merged in the public mind, or at least the minds of those leading heresy-hunting committees.

As Braukman observes (apropos of J. Edgar Hoover's efforts to discredit Martin Luther King Jr. for his sexual escapades): "the Cold War had shaped ways of thinking about political enemies as morally degenerate and sexually perverse. Hoover's targeting of King's extramarital affairs was more than a convenient ploy or a cheap attempt at character defamation. It was also an expression of an anti-Communist ethos that equated or linked–and sometimes did both–sexual immorality with radicalism and un-Americanism" (p. 180).

Quoting from state archives made available in the early 1990s, Braukman gives examples of the Florida investigators' gossip-mongering, fascination with the details of homosexual acts, and intimidation of suspects. Stings were staged in a county courthouse men's room; private interviews were held in motels as well as civic buildings; frightened teachers were pressed to answer questions about being "the active" or "the passive partner," taking "another man's penis into your mouth," strip parties, and lesbian claims of expertise at oral sex (p. 91). They were told they would be subpoenaed for public hearings if they did not tell all and name names of other gay men and lesbians they knew. The state Department of Education, although contesting the committee's jurisdiction to investigate teacher qualifications, obediently collaborated, and those identified as homosexual lost their jobs.

The committee's 1964 report, "Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida," was supposed to be its "crowning glory," writes Braukman–"the culmination of years of painstaking interrogations, surveillance, and collecting informants' secrets. But the FLIC drastically overestimated the public's tolerance for being scared straight," and the prurience of the report, which featured soft-porn gay photos along with a "Glossary of Homosexual Terms and Deviate Acts," offended many of the committee's supporters (p. 171). (Copies were offered for sale at twenty-five cents apiece.) Reports Braukman: "The Dade

County State Attorney threatened legal action to prevent the sale of the report and called it obscene" (p. 172).

The Johns Committee faded out in the early 1960s, but its legacy lingered. It was not until 1986 that the American Psychiatric Association definitively ended its stigmatizing of gay men and lesbians as "deviant" and "sexually immature," and removed homosexuality from its list of personality disorders. As Braukman recounts, homophobic myths persisted for years in Florida and elsewhere: Anita Bryant's successful 1977 campaign to repeal an antidiscrimination ordinance in Miami was a direct descendant of the Johns Committee's crusade, and the Christian Right's "reframing of older notions of subversion and sexual deviance" fueled the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s (p. 194).

But in the end, Braukman says, campaigns like Bryant's "albeit unintentionally, inspired gay men and lesbians to reconceptualize their politics. Anger translated into activism in cities and towns across the country" (p. 206). Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors; gay pride parades proliferated; and the 1969 Stonewall rebellion signaled the end of closeted shame and stigma for a critical mass of gay activists.

Braukman's book is a fine chronicle of this distressing episode in our history, although it contains some factual errors (the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee is labeled at times the "Senate Internal Subversion Subcommittee"), and some endnotes are incomplete. (The book originated as a PhD dissertation.) For another look at the Johns Committee that focuses on teachers' strategies of resistance and on the committee's turf battles with the state Department of Education, see Karen Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (2009).

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