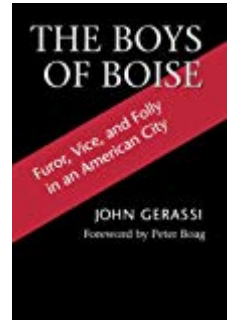


John Gerassi. *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City.* Foreword by Peter Boag. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. xxxii + 328 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-295-98167-3.



Reviewed by Thomas C. Mackey

Published on H-Urban (May, 2002)

Reprinting Not So Gay Times

When this volume first appeared in 1966, it fit the liberal times. Its sneering tone at mainstream United States culture reflected the East coast author's superior attitude of knowing what was best for the population of far-away Boise, Idaho. His goal was to inflict heterosexual guilt on the locality, to impugn the character and motivations of the local elites and the established Idaho social order, and to force social change onto a "backward" area of the country. As such, *The Boys of Boise* is a cultural relic of the social liberalism of the 1960s.

But why reprint this occasionally silly volume? This volume tells the story of a mid-1950s anti-vice campaign aimed at prosecuting "deviants" and homosexuals in Boise, Idaho. This rather routine anti-vice sweep generated a little national attention when it was reported in Time magazine that a "homosexual underworld" existed. Fear grew that a real deviant "network" existed in Boise that threatened young boys and men, threatened the foundation of society, the family, and threatened Boise's reputation as a "clean" city. For some time after the first arrests in 1955,

"Boysy" struggled with the prosecution and trial of a handful of homosexuals who resided in Boise. These individuals cruised the streets picking up young boys and men, met in restrooms in public parks and in the restrooms of the bus stations, and were allegedly overseen by a "Queen" of a well-connected family in the city. Arrests of such persons led to more confessions and accusations of other men in the community; those accusations, in turn, led to more arrests and even the arrest of a Boise banker. Most trials were routine and were "new" and "news" because the local paper, egged on by the city council, became invested in the prosecution and punishment of these homosexuals. Men accused of "crimes against nature" found themselves convicted of the acts, occasionally on the testimony of "stool pigeons," and sentenced to everything from time served up to ten years. As quickly as this anti-vice campaign started, it ended dropping off the local and national radar screen in large part because of the unseemly character of the charges and the desire of the community not to acknowledge and glorify such deviant behavior.

Scholars of United States urban anti-vice movements and actions will find nothing new or surprising with this thumbnail description of the events in Boise in the 1950s. Anti-vice campaigns of one kind or another occasionally swept through small and medium size towns and even large cities regularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such sweeps still occur but are usually aimed recently at "johns," men who patronize both female and male prostitutes, and of course anti-illegal drug raids. While earlier purity campaigns targeted female prostitutes, it was not unheard of for anti-vice sweeps to target opium users or homosexual locations such as bus and railroad restrooms and the restrooms in public parks. On its face, nothing new or "funny" occurred in Boise.

What was new was John Gerassi's argument in this book that such anti-vice raids reflected a misuse of public power against a defenseless minority, his journalist's hubris that he knew better what the local population needed and wanted in their locality, and his condemnation of the enforcement of standards of behavior by law in a locality. When published in 1966, this book sought to demystify the homosexual underworld, deny that it harmed anyone (in spite of the documents Gerassi quotes in the book that demonstrated that older homosexual males consciously sought out young men for sexual favors and abuse), and to castigate Boise--and by implication all localities--for using the criminal law to protect its children and families from such behaviors. Written in breathless journalistic outrage, this work reads as a catchall of homosexual sociology, popular psychology, oral history, and moral certainty on behalf of the author. Further, the text is frustrating because Gerassi quotes documents from city council minutes, to newspaper articles, to court transcripts at too great a length. Instead of producing a clear narrative voice, Gerassi's text is broken up into reprinted primary sources, which are, in turn, reprinted in this work. For example, pages 192 to 280 are simply the verbatim trial

transcripts of one of the trials of the accused homosexuals. These long, unnecessary documents suggest that the book was rushed to press (typical of reforming journalists).

Historians may mine this book from its primary sources but will find little else useful. A new foreword has been added to this volume by Peter G. Boag, Professor of History at Idaho State University. He described this work as a "classic study [that] depicts both middle America's traditional response to homosexuality as well as an era in the country's history before the modern gay rights movement really got underway" (p. vii). Boag then stated that the work reflects how poorly understood homosexuality was in the 1950s and even in today's anything-goes social world. Further, he alleges that the book "has withstood the test of time" (p. xi). Unfortunately, this work has clearly not stood the test of time. Stilted, arrogant, self-assured in tone and approach, and critical of the mores of the locality, Gerassi's work reflects the reforming impulses of the 1960s without adequately analyzing or accounting for the anti-vice campaign in Boise in the 1950s. As a journalist, Gerassi sought to evoke moral outrage among his readers, not historical appreciation or understanding. Boag sought to remedy this deficiency in Gerassi's work by claiming that Boise's mid-1950s anti-vice campaign was a reflection of the tensions of the Cold War era with ripple effects into concerns about the social order within the United States. While a more promising line of historical argument, it is more alleged than proven in Boag's short foreword and not supported in Gerassi's work.

Boag's foreword makes clear that he has a personal interest in the topic and in the field. In the late 1990s, he developed and submitted a grant proposal to the Idaho Board of Education to write a history of homosexuals in the Northwest. After much controversy, the Board turned down his request and even ended the grant program rather than use taxpayer monies to support such

research. "Enlightened individuals" (p. xv) supported his case for the grant so only the unenlightened could possibly oppose his grant. As a result of this professional failure, Boag envisions a direct link between the anti-vice events of the 1950s, the moral outrage of the 1960s, and the failure of the local school board to fund his research in the 1990s; plus a change. As a result, Boag convinced the University of Washington Press to print this volume in their "Columbia Northwest Classics" series to prove that the backward social nature of the region still exists.

Boag's ax to grind can be understood and dismissed. And in Gerassi's defense, he admits in a new preface to the book that his 1966 tone in the book "was a bit too superior" (p. xix). Yet Gerassi, who was a journalist in the 1960s but is now Professor of Political Science at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City College of New York, remains convinced that the anti-vice campaign was really aimed "at the more progressive politicians who wanted to modernize the city" (p. xix). His heroes, all Democrats, and his enemies, all Republicans, remain the same. He continues to view the events of Boise as a simplistic story of "victims and villains."

But perhaps this incident presents a different story; a story about the use of the criminal law to enforce social and sexual conformity in a community. Ironically, since neither Gerassi nor Boag see it, *The Boys of Boise*, is an interesting case study in United States legal history. It tells the story of how powerful local social groups (such as a businessman's club) and local institutions (such as the local newspaper and courts) employed the police and the law in an effort to shore up and confine the unseemly (many then and now say disgusting) behaviors of homosexuals. How the use of the law and public power can alter or defend the felt needs of a locality, and then the ripple effects of those efforts make the reprinting of this work justifiable. If only Gerassi or Boag had told that story instead of trying to tell the homosexual study, this

book and its reprint would receive a wider reading and be more important.

This book will interest those scholars of United States urban policy, social reform, homosexual and sexuality studies, and United States legal historians. It is an interesting story of the rights and wrongs of reprinting a volume on not so gay times.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Thomas C. Mackey. Review of Gerassi, John. *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6264>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.