
Manon Van der Heijden

Federico Garza Carvajal, *Butterflies will burn. Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico*, Austin

University of Texas Press 2003, 310 pp. + 23 b&w photos, ISBN 0-292-70183-7

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Référence électronique

Manon Van der Heijden, « Federico Garza Carvajal, *Butterflies will burn. Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico*, Austin », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [En ligne], Vol. 9, n°2 | 2005, mis en ligne le 11 février 2009, Consulté le 28 avril 2012. URL : /index318.html

Éditeur : Droz

<http://chs.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :

/index318.html

Document généré automatiquement le 28 avril 2012. La pagination ne correspond pas à la pagination de l'édition papier.

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Pagination de l'édition papier : p. 138-139

- 1 Along with the wave of surveys on early modern European criminality and legislation, related subjects, such as sodomites and gender roles in criminal courts, have been studied thoroughly as well. The ways in which those studies were presented were always very much related to the early modern sources that revealed the information: court records and other literary sources on «criminal» behaviour. Hence, historians dealing with homosexuality generally focus on the prosecution of sodomites, the arguments brought forward in court cases, the ways in which magistrates handled such cases, and the morals that lay behind such procedures. In this book on prosecuting sodomites in early modern Spain and New Spain Garza Carvajal wishes to broaden the context of the prosecution of sodomy by focussing on the connections between masculinity and the discourse surrounding sodomy in early modern Spain and colonial Mexico. By focussing on notions of manliness as the site of understanding the organization of powers in Spain and New Spain he wants to get a fuller understanding of the complexity of political, economic and ideological domination and subordination in a colonial setting. His central aim is to demonstrate how the prosecutions of sodomites in Spain and New Spain were intertwined with perceptions of manliness, linked to cultural shifts in the imperial sphere.
- 2 Let me start with a brief summary of the line of reasoning in this book. Garza Carvajal argues that there was a correlation between the «violent denial of the exterior other» in America (the inhabitants of Mexico) and the «discovery of an inner other» within European society and within the European individual. The sodomy prosecutions were part of this same historical process; thus a product of Western imperialism. In this historical process perceptions of sodomy and sodomites differed and changed in context both in Spain and New Spain. By the mid-seventeenth century, moralists and writers who supported the Spanish empire invented new perceptions of sodomy to reflect the empire's growing colonial ambitions. By focussing on the presumed effeminacy of sodomites in Mexico, Spanish moralists attempted to link homosexual practices of Indios with a different homosexual personality defined in terms of 'effeminacy and lack of manly virility'. As a result colonial officials and chroniclers began to describe an entire people as sodomites. Sodomites in both Spain and Mexico contested the perceptions of the colonizer, but they sometimes also incorporated such the discourses. By doing so, they unintentionally affirmed the state's discourses about manliness.
- 3 Garza Carvajal's book is well-written and his line of reasoning is clear, but does he really succeed in his aim to get a fuller understanding of the complex ideological domination and subordination in Spain and New Spain? The way in which he deals with his sources seems to get in the way of getting a fuller understanding of the context of sodomy prosecutions. Garza Carvajal emphasises that historians can never avoid personal positions when dealing with historical events. As he considers the idea of an objective or neutral historical text naïve, he presents an «unabashedly subjective political interpretation» of sodomy prosecutions in early modern Spain and New Spain. Like Garza Carvajal, most Western historians would probably agree that the idea of sodomy perceived as crime was not given but actively fabricated. However, only few historians would make the step that this author makes. In his attempt to provide a broader understanding of the perceptions of sodomy, the author decided to not make choices in ordering, classifying and structuring his source material, but to directly engage the totality of his sources. This way, he wants to make sure to not overlook important facts that

could prove crucial to the cultural analyses. This might be an honourable attempt, but the author fails to clarify his position in the debate on sodomy prosecutions; neither does he clarify what historians would gain by such an approach. In his aim to look at prosecuting sodomy at a totally different way, and by labelling those secular and ecclesiastical institutions that prosecuted sodomy harshly immoral, Garza Carvajal seems to overlook the context of a deeply religious (Catholic) early modern Christian society (Spain). According to our present (western) perceptions sodomy prosecutions and colonial domination – as well as the prosecutions of adultery or heresy – are immoral and hard to understand, but does Garza Carvajal really attempt to understand early modern society by treating his source material with such judgments? It seems not.

4 The author of *Butterflies will burn* withholds the reader clear information on his findings in a more practical way as well. I will mention some examples only to demonstrate this shortcoming. The author claims (p. 8) that although sodomy cases prosecuted by the courts consisted of five percent of the total number of cases only, historians should not render the number of cases of marginal importance. While noting that heresy was much more often prosecuted, he fails to give an overview of the exact numbers prosecuted by the courts over the years, for example in a table. Even so, he claims that early modern sodomy prosecutions demonstrated a direct correlation between Spain's imperial politics and its perceptions of manliness. The book also fails to present a map of the areas investigated, and the reader will find no tables with helpful overviews of sodomy prosecutions for various tribunals in various areas over time. Throughout the book the geographical areas investigated remain often vague for those who are not well-informed on the Spanish early modern history. Maps and tables would simply have overcome such lack of clarities.

5 *Butterflies will burn* is much more a book of ideas and conceptions that stimulates the reader to think again about how historians (could or should) deal with textual descriptions on prosecuted behaviour in early modern times, than it is a story on prosecuting sodomites in early modern Spain and Mexico. The focus on a different way of perceiving historical sources makes the book strong and original, but the author's approach is at the same time the weakest point of this book. The book would have gained by a clearer explanation on the benefits of this approach. Garza Carvajal has written an extraordinary book in the very sense of the word. One can debate or even reject his line of reasoning and the ways in which he approached the historical sources his study was based upon. Perhaps the true value of this provoking book is that it challenges historians to again discuss their own dealings with source material and historical events.

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Droits d'auteur

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