
David A.J. Richards, *The Rise of Gay Rights and the Fall of the British Empire: Liberal Resistance and the Bloomsbury Group*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

ISBN 978-1-107-03795-3 (hardback) £60

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In this new book, American constitutional law professor David A.J. Richards sets out an important and novel defence of gay rights. Richards takes as his starting point the claim that gay rights are fundamental to the dismantling of what he terms ‘patriarchal’ social structures, which he argues are diametrically at odds with basic liberal democratic values. What is most interesting about the book, however, is Richards’ further contention that gay rights are not only a form of resistance to the historic patriarchal subjugation of gay people and women, but also the illiberal and undemocratic ‘political patriarchy’ of imperialism, or the empire-building and colonization historically imposed by the West on much of the global South and East. To support his argument, Richards turns in the book to a reappraisal of the lives and work of the Bloomsbury Group, the influential set of 20th century English writers, intellectuals and artists whose explorations of the possibilities of gay sexuality were pivotal, Richards contends, to their further contribution not only to the emerging gay rights and feminist movements but also the growing domestic campaign to bring an end to the British Empire.

Richards’ conceptualization of patriarchy in the book is indebted to the work of Carol Gilligan, human developmental psychologist and cultural feminist, and Richards’ long-time collaborator. While Richards shares with most other feminist thinkers an overarching concern with patriarchal enforcement of the gender binary and the hierarchical authority of men over women, he takes Gilligan’s lead in concentrating more specifically on the structural violence exacted on both women and society as a whole by patriarchy’s denial at both the political and psychological levels of the ‘different voice’ of human relationality and the ethics of care: a silenced moral voice, Richards suggests in line with Gilligan, which has been most closely associated historically with the ‘feminine’ and with

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women. For Richards, gay rights constitute a form of resistance to patriarchy because gay sexuality challenges patriarchy's rigid gender binary and brings new opportunities to rediscover human relationality. This is a consequence of what Richards sees as the inherent potential for love between equals found in gay relationships.

Richards' main concern in the book is to demonstrate the close connection between the rise of gay rights and resistance to patriarchal social structures by exploring the biographies and published work of the circle of upper middle-class English friends and lovers who together comprised the Bloomsbury Group, among them Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes and Lytton Strachey. In Richards' view, it was the refusal of these highly creative individuals to abide by what he terms the 'patriarchally imposed Love Laws' of the time (not only the social and legal proscriptions against homosexuality, but also the stigma attached to relationships – sexual or otherwise – that they formed across racial and class lines) that gave them new insight into the patriarchal consequences of the forces of homophobia and sexism, and eventually also set them against the political patriarchy of imperialism. The Group's personal shared experience of breaking the Love Laws, Richards argues, was to prove instrumental in their later pacifistic opposition to the expansive European militarism leading to the First World War, and their support for the slow progress towards dismantlement of the Empire.

It is this important but often overlooked connection between the Bloomsbury Group's contribution to the rise of gay rights and their parallel campaigns against British imperialism that leads Richards to his central thesis. In the final chapter Richards revisits the modern-day argument against gay rights made by many ex-British colonies: that the global rise of gay rights constitutes a new form of Western cultural imperialism over the peoples of the global South and East. Richards seeks to counter this important political claim by arguing that the anti-imperial sentiments of the Bloomsbury Group demonstrate that gay rights have historically been intertwined with the fight against imperialism. Instead, Richards suggests that it is postcolonial nations that still reject the case for gay rights that are actually the continuing victims of imperialistic control because their objections to gay rights

show how they still remain uncritically constrained by the very same patriarchal social structures imposed on them by the British Empire itself.

Richards' project is a *tour de force* of interdisciplinary research, drawing together effortlessly constitutional, legal and political theory, biography and literary criticism into a rich reappraisal of the origins of the Anglo-American and Commonwealth gay rights movements, and their complex interaction with feminism and anti-imperialism. The book also covers a huge amount of ground: the lives and work of the Bloomsbury Group are located against the backdrop of a much broader historical narrative that begins with the origins of patriarchy in the ancient world, and ends with reflections on the links between the Group's resistance to patriarchy and the late 20th century liberalization of attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain, the US, Canada, South Africa and India.

However, after reading the book I am also left with some reservations about Richards' approach to this fascinating subject matter. My concern lies primarily with Richards' more or less explicit assumption throughout the book that gay identity and gay lived experience invariably bring with them a progressive, Left (but not *too* Left), liberal democratic world view that leads gay people inexorably to further political investment in feminism, anti-racism, redistributive capitalism, and so on. One gets the sense that in pushing towards this conclusion, Richards has allowed his personal convictions to blur into dubious assumptions about the existence of an essentially progressive gay ethics. And yet for me some of the most interesting aspects of Richards' reappraisal of the Bloomsbury Group is evidence of a less palatable gay 'moral voice', especially among the Group's gay men, whose support for the emerging feminist movement seems really to have been equivocal at best.

For instance, one telling biographical detail about the Bloomsbury Group touched on only briefly by Richards is Virginia Woolf's "fury" with E.M. Forster over his lack of concern over the refusal of the London Library to admit women to its membership (p.101). More important still, however, is the revelation a few pages later that "[h]aving imbibed the sexist assumptions that women were inferior to men, Keynes and Strachey had come to believe that homosexual relations to the intellectual and talented young men to whom they were attracted was a superior love,

what they called the ‘Higher Sodomy’” (p.104), implying that the superiority of gay male sexuality was seen by these two gay members of the Bloomsbury Group as *premised* on the absence of the inferior female sex!. For scholars well versed in the historic and contemporary tensions between the aims of some gay male politics and (lesbian) feminist activism, such biographical snippets of evidence about the attitudes of these men seem to point to a more complex, fragmented and unstable relationship between women and gay men that, as Keynes and Strachey’s reasoning suggests, may actually result, to some extent, from specifically *gay male* patriarchal impulses at odds with feminism.

Richards’ own response to this fleeting and largely under-scrutinised evidence of anti-feminist sentiments among some of the gay men of the Bloomsbury Group is revealing. Rather than accepting the prospect that it might reveal something of the hidden tensions at the heart of the gay rights movement, he concludes instead that the significance of the evidence should not be overstated: rather, “[w]e must make the best interpretation we can of them from our point of view, emphasizing the strands of their lives and works (breaking the Love Laws, for example) that are most important” (p.101). And so, in one sentence, Richards seems to discount almost entirely the apparent misogyny of Forster, Keynes and Strachey, absolving them from criticism on the basis of the much greater significance of their contribution to the (much more important?) emergence of gay rights.

Richards’ failure to confront the inevitable complexities of ostensibly shared gay identities, the political tensions hidden within those identities (in this case, between gay men and feminism) and the extent to which gay world views might conflict with his own, is also apparent in his rather different interpretation of the homosexuality of the Soviet spies Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt, who like the men of the Bloomsbury Group before them were Cambridge ‘Apostles’. After reflecting on their stories, Richards cannot help but sneer at the gay men’s communist politics and distinguish them ethically from the gay men of the Bloomsbury Group: the “gay loves of these latter-day Apostles grounded their resistance to fascism, but their betrayal of Britain suggests a loss of the liberal good sense of their predecessors, all of whom ... rejected Marxism as resting

on indefensible ideas of apodictically certain laws of history” (p.158). However, in doing so Richards refuses even to contemplate that Burgess and Blunt’s subaltern gay experience might have had an important role to play in their opposition to the liberal capitalism that Richards holds so dear. Instead, the two men’s communism is effectively sutured from their homosexuality by Richards’ analysis, and then individualized and pathologized as merely an illustration of the ‘loss of liberal good sense’.

Richards’ unswerving belief in the progressive and liberal characteristics of gay experience also limits, in my view the book’s primary account of the relationship between gay rights movements and anti-imperialism. In particular, by focusing solely on the allegations by homophobic postcolonial governments that international gay rights are a contemporary form of Western domination over the global South, Richards ignores the wealth of recent literature that has traced concerns about the imperialist pretensions of the gay rights movement, but emanating from the progressive Left itself. For instance, Joseph Massad’s influential book *Desiring Arabs* (2007) offers a compelling thesis that a well-meaning but misplaced Western, white, gay male activism has been guilty of epistemic, ethical and political violence by displacing endogenous sexual meanings found in the Arab world with what is claimed by these activists to be the truth of a universal gay identity. Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) has also shown how Western gay politics is being co-opted into forms of ‘homonationalism’, as contemporary Western neoimperialist strategies like the ‘War on Terror’ are increasingly legitimated by the claim of existential threat posed by racialized Others to ‘liberated’ Western gays.

Richards might well disagree with these positions (and everything in this book indicates he would be unpersuaded by the postcolonial challenge they pose to his benign view of both gay experience and the international gay rights movement). However, their absence in a book so squarely focused on the connection between gay rights and imperialism is disappointing. It is unclear whether Richards overlooked this developing literature, or simply decided it was not work that merited inclusion. Either way though, it highlights the limits of Richards’ thesis

that gay rights are intrinsically anti-imperialist and suggests that for all Richards' 'right-on' progressive aspirations for the gay rights movement, the narrowness of his perspective as a Western gay man may have closed his mind to the prospect of the complicity of gay rights in new imperial power relations. Indeed, it is perhaps some indication of the influence of Richards' own positionality on the book's direction that while postcolonial scholars like Massad and Puar are left out entirely from his account of the nature of gay rights, in the book's final chapter Richards readily defends the existence of a universal, more or less homogenous, transnational and inherently progressive gay experience and politics by grounding it in David Halperin's evocation of the 'culture of camp': the revealingly parochial reworking of American pop-culture by primarily Western and white gay men, based on what Halperin sees as a shared love of the likes of Judy Garland and Joan Crawford (pp.241-2)!