



The Emergence of the Brazilian Gay Liberation Movement, 1977-1981

Author(s): James N. Green

Source: *Latin American Perspectives*, Winter, 1994, Vol. 21, No. 1, Brazil in Transition: Democratization, Privatization, and Working-Class Resistance (Winter, 1994), pp. 38-55

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2633541>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Sage Publications, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Latin American Perspectives*

The Emergence of the Brazilian Gay Liberation Movement, 1977-1981

by
James N. Green

The Brazilian gay liberation movement emerged from the interaction of the international gay movement and the changing political situation in Brazil, which provided the catalysts for the organization of gay men and lesbians to fight for their political, social, and democratic rights. The focus of the historical analysis to follow is the gay movement as it developed in São Paulo, the political, economic, and cultural center of the country. It is a contribution toward a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the development of the movement that has not yet been written. João S. Trevisan (1986) discusses the movement in "Gay Politics and the Manipulation of Homosexuality," but his work, in addition to being extremely partisan toward the conservative wing of the movement and hostile toward the left, is not a systematic historical account of the events of 1976 onward. Sonia Alvarez (1990) presents an overview of the Brazilian women's movement that emerged at the same time as the gay liberation movement but mentions lesbian groups only in passing. Her work does, however, provide an excellent account of the political debate within the women's movement over the issue of autonomy vs. partisan politics that was also to polarize the gay movement. Because I was a participant in that movement from 1977 to 1981 and a leader of its left wing as the movement polarized, the obvious problems of overcoming bias must be balanced against the advantages of an inside view. This essay should be seen not as a definitive analysis but rather as a first step toward a more comprehensive study that remains to be undertaken.

In the period discussed here, an independent lesbian movement had not yet developed. An excellent complement to this work would be an analysis of the development of lesbian organizations fighting against sexism and homophobia in Brazil.

James N. Green is a doctoral student in Latin American history at the University of California, Los Angeles. His dissertation research focuses on a comparative analysis of the Argentine and Brazilian gay liberation movements of the 1970s and the construction of gay male identity and community in São Paulo and Buenos Aires from 1950 to 1980.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 80, Vol. 21 No. 1, Winter 1994 38-55
© 1994 Latin American Perspectives

THE INTERNATIONAL GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Although homosexual rights groups had existed in Europe, especially in Germany, until the early 1930s, they were essentially eliminated by the rise of fascism, which wiped out the German movement, and World War II, when other groups in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Great Britain dissolved (Lauristen and Thorstad, 1974). Although new groups form in Europe in the post-World War II era, the impetus for the new international gay liberation movement came from the United States. Groups such as the Mattachine Society, founded by members of the Communist party in Southern California in 1950, and the lesbian Daughters of Bilitis provided some sense of community and political organization in the 1950s and early 1960s during the conservative Truman and Eisenhower period and into the Kennedy/Johnson years, when McCarthyism made a target of homosexuals along with communists in its witch hunting. However, it was the social upheavals of the 1960s—the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the counterculture—that provided the social environment for the gay liberation movement (D'Emilio, 1980).

The June 27-28, 1969, Stonewall Rebellion in New York City, which pitted gay men and lesbians, transvestites, and street people against the police, was the catalyst for the emergence of the U.S. movement. Within a year, hundreds of gay liberation groups sprang up throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. According to Adam (1987: 82-83),

On three continents, gay movements in the early 1970s developed along a similar course, with parallel, Left-oriented gay liberation groups forming along with more liberal civil rights organizations. With the general decline of New Left movements in the late 1970s, self-professed gay liberation fronts faded, leaving reformist groups in the political field and engendering a new proliferation of gay and lesbian interest groups organized within existing institutions: in the work place, church, the theatre, social services, business and sports.

In Latin America, the gay liberation movement emerged in two countries in the early 1970s—Mexico and Argentina. The Argentine Frente de Liberación Homosexual (Homosexual Liberation Front—FLH), founded in 1971, published a paper called *Somos* (1973-1976) and protested antigay policies of the government and the attacks on gays in Chile after the Pinochet coup d'état of 1973 but was dissolved with the military takeover in 1976. Many of its leaders fled into exile (Frente de Liberación Homosexual, 1977).

BRAZIL: DEMOCRATIC OPENINGS AND THE DEMISE OF THE DICTATORSHIP

In 1969, when the gay liberation movement was spreading worldwide, Brazil was entering its worst period of political repression under the presidency of the former head of the secret police, Garrastazu Medici. The Brazilian military had toppled a civilian government in 1964 and was firmly entrenched. In 1968 mass mobilizations in Rio de Janeiro (the March of the 100,000) and wildcat strikes in Osasco in the industrial suburbs of São Paulo and in Contagem, Belo Horizonte, had been repressed, and the labor, student, and opposition movements had been crushed. The Fifth Institutional Act had temporarily shut down the Congress and permanently suspended the 1967 Constitution (Green, 1979: 14). In this environment of repression, there was no political space for an organized gay movement.

When Medici was replaced by General Ernesto Geisel in 1974, the Brazilian economy was facing a downturn due to the 1973 rise in international oil prices. The government's economic policies under Minister of Planning Delfim Neto provoked opposition from certain sectors of the bourgeoisie, which along with liberal professionals and intellectuals began to join the opposition to the dictatorship. The victory of the opposition party, the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (Brazilian Democratic Movement—MDB), over the Aliança Renovadora Nacional (National Renovating Alliance—ARENA), the government party, in the 1974 elections signaled that the dictatorship needed to seek an alternative strategy to contain the opposition (Green, 1979: 15). Geisel began speaking of *distensão* (decompression). According to Alvarez (1990: 85),

“Popular perception” of the possibilities for successful protest also changed drastically with Geisel's *distensão*, as the authoritarian regime at least branched a new “democratic” discourse. Thus, though *distensão* did not generate political mobilization, it unquestionably fueled it. Without the more flexible political climate of decompression, the climate of fear which reigned under Medici (1970-74) might have prevailed and dissipated many of the mobilizational initiatives of the nascent social movements.

In 1977 widespread student mobilization erupted in protest against the arrest of seven students and workers who had been leafleting in the industrial suburbs of São Paulo calling for a workers' celebration of May Day. A year later, on May 12, 1978, 3,000 workers at the Swedish Saab-Scania plant went on strike, demanding a 20 percent pay increase. The strike quickly spread, and more than 275,000 workers brought production to a halt at plants owned by Ford, Pirelli, Mercedes-Benz, and Fiat, ending what had been hailed by the dictatorship as a decade of labor peace in Brazil. As a result of the 1978

strike wave, the Brazilian working class moved onto center stage of the political scene (Green, 1979: 14-15). The next year, 3.2 million workers struck, joined by teachers, professionals, bank workers, and public employees (see Moises, 1982; Keck, 1984).

The military recognized that it had to move fast to control the situation. In June 1978, Geisel announced the first steps toward institutional reform and a "slow and gradual" return to democracy. He named the former head of National Security Intelligence, João Batista Figueiredo, as his presidential successor. Figueiredo initiated an expanded version of Geisel's "limited liberalization" designed to defuse the growing united opposition to the dictatorship. He promised to hand over the government to a civilian president in 1985, eased up on censorship, and undertook to stop torturing political prisoners. Under Figueiredo there was an amnesty allowing for the release of all political prisoners, the return of exiles, and the pardoning of torturers. A party reform bill abolished the unpopular ARENA party and the opposition MDB and provided for the formation of new political parties. Within the party regrouping, the new labor movement headed by the 1978 strike leader Luís Inácio da Silva (known as Lula) formed the Workers' party, which united the militant labor movement, the rank-and-file progressive church movement, and sectors of the left.

THE OPPRESSED ORGANIZE: THE WOMEN'S AND UNITED BLACK MOVEMENTS

The period of democratic openings permitted the Brazilian left to reorganize after the repressive Medici years had wiped out the pro-Castro urban guerrilla groups and the pro-Albanian Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist party of Brazil—PC do B) guerrilla warfare in the Amazon. The diverse left groups expanded from the student movement to the labor movement and played key roles in the strike wave of 1978-1980. The alternative press through which the left skirted censorship flowered, and movements that had developed in the United States and Europe began to be discussed in Brazil.

In 1975, there were public commemorations of International Women's Year in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte, a meeting on the situation of women in São Paulo sponsored by the United Nations and the Metropolitan Episcopal Tribunal, and the founding of *Brasil Mulher*, the first women's monthly newspaper of the contemporary movement. A year later, São Paulo feminists founded the paper *Nós Mulheres*, which targeted poor and working-class women as its principal readership. *Nós Mulheres* "insisted

that women must organize their own political space within the general struggle for emancipation and stressed the need for a feminist press within the progressive alternative press" (Alvarez, 1990: 95-96).

Since many of the activists in the women's movement had come from left organizations and a significant number had lived in exile in Europe or the United States, where they had had contact with the international women's movement, there was an important discussion about the relation of the struggle of women against oppression and discrimination and the fight against the dictatorship to the capitalist system as a whole. Because the pro-Soviet Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist party—PCB), the pro-Cuban Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (8th of October Revolutionary Movement—MR-8), and the pro-Albanian PC do B constituted the majority of the left and tended to see the struggle for women's rights as subordinate to that of the working class as a whole, the women's movement became critical of this left for refusing to deal with gender-specific problems. This debate reached a climax at the Second Congress of São Paulo Women in March 1980, when a dispute between feminists and leftists broke out (Alvarez, 1990: 121-123) and the feminists called for "autonomy" of the movement from the leftist political parties. According to the Brazilian journalist Maria Carneiro da Cunha (Alvarez, 1990: 124),

The purpose of the Congress was discussion of women's specific issues. But in bringing together such a large number of people, many of them with divergent political interests, it became practically impossible to avoid that there were attempts at manipulation on the part of diverse political-partisan currents, more preoccupied with propagandizing their "slogans" than in discussion of women's *problématique* in spite of the efforts of various members of the coordination to impede this from happening. That is, that women serve once again as the *massa de manobra* (manipulable mass) for the interests which are not their own.

Alvarez summarized the feminist political identity within the larger women's movement that was consolidated as a result of the congress (1990: 125):

Where in the early 1970s, the Brazilian left had identified two kinds of feminism—one acceptable and one unacceptable—Brazilian socialist feminists now began distinguishing between two kinds of left—one acceptable, which acknowledged the specificity of women's oppression and respected the organizational autonomy of the movement, and another unacceptable, which subsumed women's struggle with the class struggle and attempted to instrumentalize and manipulate women's movement organizations.

The black movement that had evolved in the course of the democratic opening and was reorganizing nationwide also maintained an "autonomist"

approach to the political parties, insisting on its independence as a movement. However, because of the class nature of the overwhelming majority of black Brazilians, the Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement—MNU) saw its struggle as directly linked to that of the working class, calling on black workers to join others in a United May Day Demonstration in 1979 (*Força Negra*, 1979).

THE GAY MOVEMENT BLOSSOMS: LAMPÃO DA ESQUINA AND SOMOS

Attempts were made in 1975 and 1976 to organize homosexuals in Brazil, but the political climate proved unfavorable. According to a report in the alternative publication *Bagaço*, on July 4, 1976, the First Congress of Brazilian Homosexuals was called by the União do Homossexual Brasileiro (Union of Brazilian Homosexuals), to be held in the gardens of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. On that day, 20 police cars, including 8 arrest vans, with 70 men from the General Department of Special Investigation surrounded the museum as reporters gathered to cover the event announced in a leaflet circulated three days previously. As a result, no congress took place. Although it is unclear who actually called the event and whether there were indeed willing participants thwarted by the police's show of force, the publication of the story indicates an interest in organizing among some Brazilian gays.

In the same year, João S. Trevisan, a writer from São Paulo who had lived in the United States in the early 1970s and was in contact with the San Francisco Bay Area gay liberation movement, attempted to form a discussion group on homosexuality among gay university students. According to Trevisan (1986: 135),

There were never more than a dozen at the meetings, all young men. Some came with vague liberal and assertive propositions, while the thoughts and feelings of others were hampered by the ideology of the old left. We tried to study some texts. However, the participants, who were very reticent about the experiment, were paralyzed by feelings of guilt—even when they had been humiliated by their party comrades for being homosexual. The big question that they asked themselves, frequently heard in gay groups in the movement's first phase, was: "Is it politically valid for us to discuss sexuality, something generally considered secondary given the situation in Brazil?" All movements run up against this question without reaching a clear answer. As if that was not enough, 70% of the group frankly admitted that they considered themselves abnormal because of their homosexuality. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that the project fell apart after a few painful meetings.

In late 1977 a group of gay intellectuals met with Winston Leyland of the San Francisco-based Gay Sunshine Press to discuss an anthology of gay Latin American literature. From this meeting the idea emerged of forming a collective to publish a newspaper for homosexuals that would be a vehicle for discussions on sexuality, racial discrimination, the arts, ecology, and *machismo*. The first issue was published in April 1978 under the title *Lampião da Esquina*, which had a double meaning—"lamppost on the corner," in reference to gay street life, and Lampião, a Robin Hood-type bandit figure who roamed the Brazilian Northeast in the early 20th century.

During this period of political semiopenings, the Brazilian government tried to suppress the discussion of homosexuality through press censorship. In 1977 Celso Curo, a journalist from São Paulo whose "Coluna do Meio" (Middle Column) in the daily *Última Hora* served as a sort of bulletin board for the gay community, was charged with "offending morality and propriety." The phrase dated back to censorship laws passed in 1946 (Young, 1979: 3). A year later, Brazil's second-largest news magazine, *Istóé*, devoted a cover story to the question of homosexuality, and as a result nine journalists affiliated with the magazine were threatened with government investigation for violating the morality statute.

At the same time, in May 1978 a group was formed in São Paulo that was to evolve into Brazil's first gay liberation group. The group initially called itself Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais (Nucleus for Action for Homosexuals' Rights), and in its first stage it acted as a consciousness-raising group. According to one of its internal information sheets (Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais, 1978b, my translation):

For some time a group of homosexuals (men and women) have been meeting to discuss our condition as an oppressed and marginal group within our society. After a first phase of identification and exchange of experience, we began to discuss what could be done about our situation; several ideas emerged and we tried to reach a consensus. However, there were diverse possibilities, and so we tried to meet all expectations.

The group's activities included study and discussion, militancy, services, consciousness raising, artistic activities, and nonverbal expression. In spite of its limited membership, the group had already had some public exposure in letters analyzing *Lampião* (Somos, 1980a) and denouncing the sexist attitude of the mainstream tabloids. The latter declaration was supported by several "alternative," left-leaning newspapers that had appeared during the period of liberalization (Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais, 1978a). In September 1978, the group decided that it needed to broaden participation, and a public meeting was planned to which people close to it

were invited. As a result of that meeting, the group set up six or more subgroups that were to meet separately, with diverse objectives and activities in accordance with the wishes of their members, and periodic general meetings (Somos, 1980a). The size of the group did not increase significantly, however, remaining at 15-20 as people moved in and out. In December 1978, as a result of an internal debate about ways to broaden its appeal, the group changed its name to Somos: Grupo de Afirmação Homossexual (We Are: Group of Homosexual Affirmation). It was argued that the new name paid political homage to the Frente de Liberación Homossexual of Argentina and its magazine *Somos*. A former member of the FLH living in São Paulo at this time had brought news of it, and it had been seen by several of Somos's original members as an example to follow.

On February 8, 1979, Somos was invited to participate in what was to prove a historic debate on minorities in the social science department of the University of São Paulo. More than 300 jammed into the auditorium to attend it. The panel included among others João Trevisan and Darcy Penteado of *Lampião da Esquina* and three members of Somos. During the discussion period, the debate that was developing in the Brazilian women's movement came to the fore as students complained that the Brazilian left was antigay and representatives of the pro-Soviet, pro-Albanian, and pro-Cuban organizations argued that instead of fighting for specific issues that divided the left people should unite in the general struggle against the dictatorship (Dantas, 1979: 9). The debate made Somos more widely known, and a meeting held several days later at the Catholic University produced a large number of new members, including many women. Whereas in 1978 no more than four women had spent some time in the organization, after February 1979 the numbers of men and women in Somos were about the same, and the questions of *machismo* and male domination began to be raised as important issues (Somos, 1980a).

As the gay movement expanded, the Brazilian government attacked it again by trying to close down *Lampião da Esquina*. Since August 1978 the paper had been the subject of a police inquiry in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo on a charge of offending "public morality." A leaked document indicating that the military intended to shut down the alternative press either through the use of the Press Law or through financial audits was denounced by the Brazilian opposition. The editors of *Lampião* were subsequently accused of having offended morality and propriety, which could lead to a year's imprisonment. *Lampião* received widespread support from the journalists' union and the Brazilian Press Association, which provided a lawyer free of charge to defend its editors, as well as from cultural and artistic figures and groups.

The Permanent Commission for the Defense of Freedom of Expression declared the government's actions a "subterfuge . . . for censorship" (Young, 1979: 5). The charges and the financial audit were eventually dropped. Somos, in one of its first acts of political activism, formed a committee in defense of *Lampião* that circulated a petition protesting the government's action (Comité de Defesa do Jornal *Lampião*, 1979).

In October 1979 Somos reorganized once again in response to the desire of its participants to be more activist-oriented, and its composition expanded to include blacks, older people, and lesbians (Somos, 1980a). As more lesbians joined, women tended to meet separately and discuss their oppression, and this led to the formation of a grouping that would eventually take on the name Ação Lésbica-Feminista and leave Somos around April 1980. This offshoot remained close to the left wing of Somos and mobilized its members to participate with it in the May Day March in São Paulo.

Somos's second public political effort involved joining the MNU in a protest march against racial discrimination on November 20, 1979, to celebrate the National Day of Black Consciousness. Somos carried a huge banner declaring itself "Against Racial Discrimination, Somos Group of Homosexual Affirmation" and distributed a leaflet that said: "The combativeness of Zumbi [an Afro-Brazilian who fought slavery in the 17th century] is an example for all oppressed sectors of our society in the fight for freedom. Coming from our own discrimination as homosexuals, we show our solidarity with all blacks in their struggle against racism" (Somos, 1979, my translation). This public act of solidarity was significant; although emphasis was placed on solidarity with other oppressed sectors, some leading activists were reluctant to link up with other movements.

On December 16, 1979, *Lampião* called a meeting in Rio de Janeiro of representatives of the new gay groups that were popping up all over the country to discuss the possibility of a congress of homosexual groups. It was unanimously decided to hold such a conference in São Paulo in April 1980 (Bittencourt, 1980a: 7-10).

THE GAY MOVEMENT POLARIZED

Another massive wave of strikes shook the industrial suburbs of São Paulo in April 1980, but this time the government responded by taking over the metalworkers' union of São Bernardo, led by Lula. This was the context for the First National Meeting of Homosexual Groups. The first two days of the meeting were attended by people representing the new groups organized in the previous year: AUE (Rio de Janeiro), Eros (São Paulo), Beijo Livre

(Brasília), Libertos (Guarulhos), Somos (São Paulo), Somos (Sorocaba), and the *Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista* (São Paulo). According to the report on the workshops, the Brazilian gay movement counted 300 activists (Bittencourt, 1980b: 4-6). This first national meeting was to be the battleground of the two main tendencies within the gay movement as the autonomist wing fought for total independence from other social struggles and political groupings and the left wing favored linking the gay movement to other political and social movements that were mobilizing against and weakening the dictatorship. The catalyst and scapegoat for the split that was to occur in the movement because of these two divergent political perspectives was the *Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista* (Homosexual Faction of the Socialist Convergence).

The Socialist Convergence was a Trotskyist organization founded in 1975 in São Paulo by former militants of other left currents who had been in contact with Argentine Trotskyists. Originally called the *Liga Operária* (Workers' League), it began organizing among students and then in 1977 shifted its political activity to the industrial working class of greater São Paulo, recruiting several important young worker-activists. In 1977, seven members of the group were arrested and badly tortured for distributing pro-May Day leaflets. The arrest sparked a massive outpouring of the student movement that resulted in their release and contributed to the abandonment of torture as an instrument of political repression. In August 1978, the *Liga Operária* became the Socialist Convergence at a public meeting in São Paulo, adopting a plank in its platform in favor of the rights of homosexuals. It was the first Brazilian left organization to publicly take this position. In January 1979, a leading unionist from Santo André who also happened to be a member of the Socialist Convergence presented a resolution at the Ninth Congress of São Paulo Metalworkers in Lins calling for the formation of a workers' party.

In June 1979 four gay members of the Socialist Convergence began to meet to discuss ways to implement the homosexual-rights plank of the platform. As the group waged an internal education campaign and as the Socialist Convergence grew to become the political leadership of the São Paulo High School Students' Association, the numbers of gays and lesbians within the organization increased. The group decided to organize publicly as the Homosexual Faction of the Socialist Convergence. Two of its members, who had been active in *Somos* since its founding, began to push for a more activist orientation of the gay movement, stressing the need to join the struggles of the oppressed and the working class (Okita, 1981: 67).

As late as April 1981, when the Brazilian gay movement was three years old, the newspaper *Hora do Povo*, the political organ of the MR-8, held that homosexuality was a sickness and a form of masturbation. The *Voz da*

Unidade, the newspaper of the PCB, asserted that the gay-rights question was not important enough to be included in its program (Okita, 1981: 73). It was, however, against the Socialist Convergence that the editors of *Lampião*, some of whom had been members of left organizations and had suffered as gay men in those organizations, launched a systematic campaign, linking it to Cuba and the orthodox left and stating that its Homosexual Faction was merely the equivalent of a women's auxiliary designed to keep gay socialists in line (Trevisan, 1980: 145). When to a closed session of the first national meeting a resolution was presented that the movement show solidarity with the working-class strike going on in greater São Paulo by participating in the May Day March in São Bernardo do Campo, participants, after fierce debate, voted 54 to 53 against it. Members of São Paulo's Somos, still the strongest gay group in the country, also split, with a majority voting in favor of participating in the demonstration.

The third day of the national meeting was attended by over 800 people—the largest public gathering in favor of gay rights to take place in Brazil up to that time. Immediately thereafter, the majority of members of Somos São Paulo decided to participate in the May Day demonstration, and a contingent of 50 marched under the banners “STOP THE INTERVENTION IN THE ABC UNIONS: HOMOSEXUAL COMMISSION FOR MAY 1ST” and “STOP DISCRIMINATION AGAINST HOMOSEXUAL WORKERS.” A leaflet distributed by the ad hoc Commission of Homosexuals in Favor of May 1st, which had organized the contingent, expressed solidarity with the striking metalworkers, linked their struggle with that of the oppressed (blacks, women, and homosexuals), pointed to instances of the discrimination that gay men and lesbians suffered as workers, and called on the unity of working class to end such discrimination (Comissão de Homossexuais Pro- 1º de Maio, 1980).

The May Day celebration in São Bernardo do Campo was held in a climate of repression. All the major roads from São Paulo to the suburban industrial center were blocked by the police to cut down on participation. The demonstrators were allowed to march through the streets of the city only at the last minute while army helicopters flew overhead to disrupt the demonstration. Nevertheless, over 100,000 workers and supporters marched to the Vila Euclides Stadium, where 50,000 applauded their arrival. The group within Somos that opposed the left wing's support for the Brazilian working class decided to celebrate May Day with a picnic at the zoo. As a result of the May Day demonstration, the “autonomist” wing of Somos split from the group to form *Otra Coisa* (Something Else). Several months later, Somos approved a statement of principles that held that while the organization was autonomous and “would not affiliate with any political party, members of the organization

were allowed to hold any political ideology and belong to any political party, and the group would participate in any political demonstration it saw fit to join" (Somos, 1980b).

Gay and lesbian members of the Socialist Convergence responded to the flurry of attacks against socialists within the gay movement in an open letter to *Lampião* after the May 1980 split of Somos, but it was never published. In part the letter said (Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista, 1980, my translation):

As to the much-noted split of Somos/SP, we only want to state that it has been divided for some time and was only waiting to consummate an open break. We believe it is easy to blame the Socialist Convergence (as those who left Somos have done) for hiding behind a lack of political arguments and the fear of being in the minority. In the name of the much-touted autonomy, this same group opposed the participation of Somos in the May First commemorations in São Bernardo, proposing as an alternative a picnic. And the members of Somos showed once again that there was a dividing line among them: on one side those who wanted to make Somos a dynamic and vital movement positioning itself clearly on the side of exploited and oppressed sectors of the population and on the other surrealistic homosexuals who wanted to turn Somos into an idealistic ghetto, isolating it from real conflicts, and in practice were only playing the game of their own executioners.

While the red-baiting against Somos continued in *Lampião*, the gay movement in São Paulo faced another serious challenge. On May 24, 1980, at the second anniversary celebration of Somos held in a local gay club, one of the members announced that the police had begun to round up gays, lesbians, transvestites, and prostitutes in downtown São Paulo. An emergency meeting of various gay organizations was called to plan a response to this, and in the course of it representatives of Somos proposed a public demonstration and supporters of *Lampião* and *Otra Coisa* proposed a Carnival celebration through the streets under siege (Trevisan, 1986: 149). The organizing of a demonstration went ahead, and Somos played a key role in mobilizing for it. On June 13, 1980, 500 people gathered on the steps of the Municipal Theater, a traditional free-speech area, to protest Police Chief Richetti's roundup of over 1,500 in the previous month. As a mist began to fall, activists began calling for the removal of the police chief and urging the rally to march through the streets of São Paulo. Slowly the crowd moved through the downtown area, its numbers growing to almost 1,000. This was by far the largest political act of the gay movement, and it was considered one of the reasons that the police raids and roundups ceased soon thereafter (Adam, 1987: 143).

At this point Somos began raising funds to rent a headquarters in downtown São Paulo and eventually became the first organization of its kind in

Brazil to have a space that could hold 100 or more for meetings and fund-raising parties. In October 1980 it was the object of a threat by the right-wing Cruzada Anti-Homossexualismo (Antihomosexual Crusade), which, in the style of reactionary groups such as the New Fatherland Phalanx, the Moral Brigade, and the Anticommunist Commandos, sent the organization a letter threatening to “clean up the ‘oil spot’ of cheap perfume that is masculine prostitution . . . [that] prostitutes the Sacred Brazilian Family, weakening the foundations of the Nation” (Cruzada Anti-Homossexualismo, 1980, my translation). In protest, the group participated in another demonstration in São Bernardo do Campo with the banner “STOP TERRORIST ACTS: SOMOS GRUPO DE AFIRMAÇÃO HOMOSSEXUAL” (*O Corpo*, November 1980, 8).

After a year of intensive activity a meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in December 1980 to plan a second national meeting. While representatives of 16 groups attended, it became clear that the movement was still quite small. The groups were not growing, and there was widespread confusion about the direction of the movement (Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista, 1981a). In fact, no second national gathering ever took place.

On April 14 and 15, 1981, four groups from the gay movement in São Paulo—Ação Lésbica-Feminista, Somos, Alegria-Alegria, and the Homosexual Faction of the Socialist Convergence—met at the University of São Paulo to discuss the movement’s problems and explore areas of common action. The participants decided to organize a demonstration to commemorate the June 13, 1980, public protest against police repression as the National Day of Homosexual Struggle and to encourage the lesbians of the different groups to hold monthly discussion meetings to increase the dialog among organizations (Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista, 1981b).

On May 1, 1981, members of Somos and other gay activists marched in the May Day demonstration in São Bernardo with the banners “STOP THE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST HOMOSEXUAL WORKERS” and “DOWN WITH THE NATIONAL SECURITY ACT” in a contingent organized as Homosexual Militants Building the Workers’ Party (Montero, Mott, and Asunção, 1981: 14). These activists began raising the demands of lesbians and gay men within the Workers’ party. At the national convention of the Workers’ party held in September 1981, Lula said that he defended “the right of minorities to organize and defend their space,” adding that “we will not permit that homosexuality will be treated as a sickness, and much less a case for the police, in our party. We will defend the respect that they deserve, calling on them to participate in the building of our society” (*Folha de São Paulo*, September 28, 1981). In the 1982 elections, the Workers’ party fielded eight gay candidates, including an incumbent, João Batista Breda,

who had declared that he was gay on national television, and Brazil experienced an unprecedented national discussion of gay life in the media and the arts (Adam, 1987: 143).

In July 1981 the editorial board of *Lampião* decided to close down the paper. According to Trevisan (1986: 150-151), who became one of the board's most outspoken opponents of the gay movement's left wing and of the participation of organized socialists in the movement, *Lampião*'s "divergence from the general direction of the gay movement became more and more pronounced" as it "radicalized its repudiation of gay activism." The turnout at the June 13, 1981, demonstration in front of the Municipal Theater to commemorate the 1980 March of 1,000 against police repression was limited to 200-250 (Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista, 1981c). The waning of the movement coincided with the severe economic recession of 1981-1982 and the resulting downturn in the labor movement. During the same period there was a general reflux of middle-class-based social movements in the face of the limited political opportunities allowed them by the government.

In the United States and Western Europe the more reformist and service-oriented organizations came to the fore as the more militant gay liberationist movement receded. In Brazil, however, the antileft-wing forces led by *Lampião* crumbled after the post-Somos split for lack of organizational or political definition and therefore were unable to take over the political space of the receding militant wing. As Trevisan (1986: 152) sums up the situation: "If it is true that the gay experience implies the potential for change, it also seems to be true that very little can be expected from the remnants of the gay movement in Brazil—confused activists in scarcely representative liberationist groups, exhausted and incapable of debate or mobilization." Only one gay organization, Grupo Gay da Bahia, survived the collapse of the movement. Nevertheless, the experience of the first Brazilian gay liberation movement and particularly the work of its left wing provide an excellent example of the potential for the organization of the oppressed in a country outside of Western Europe and the United States.

CONCLUSIONS

Had Brazil not been under the domination of a military dictatorship in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, it seems clear that the Brazilian gay liberation movement would have developed somewhat earlier than it did. The political opening in Argentina from 1971 to 1976 provided the opportunity for a movement in that country, and there is no reason to believe that a comparable

movement would not have coalesced in Brazil had the political conditions been favorable. Just as the gay liberation movement in the United States and Western Europe was impelled by the student, civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements, so the belated Brazilian movement was encouraged by the organization of students and labor that destroyed the myth that the military was invincible.

There is no question that the international gay movement had a direct impact on the Brazilian movement through the visit of gay activists from the United States and the experiences of Brazilians living abroad. The movement as a whole looked to Western Europe and the United States for ideas and inspiration. Moreover, former activists from the Argentine FLH provided encouragement in the movement's first stages.

From the early days of Somos, the vanguard organization within the movement, a sector of the membership understood the relationship between the space won by students and labor and the space that the gay movement needed to develop within Brazilian society. Whereas in 1975-1976 attempts to form gay consciousness-raising groups had failed as participants doubted their own need to organize and questioned the possibility of success, 1977-1978 was a period of marked change in the level of consciousness not only of gay men and lesbians but of other oppressed and exploited groups, most notably the working class, women, and black Brazilians. Thus, the first public contact of the first gay organization was the Somos committee in defense of *Lampião*, which sought support from the alternative left press and prominent artists and intellectuals who were opponents of the regime.

Because the dominant ideology within the movement was that there was a natural affinity between the gay movement and organized women and blacks, it was logical that feminists and the MNU were the first organizational allies of the gay movement or at least the first groups with which it sought to build an alliance. Although the more conservative wing of the movement was to carry out a systematic campaign against the Brazilian left in the period 1979-1981, no comparable critique was aimed at the MNU, which accepted the solidarity of Somos at public demonstrations but made no real overtures to the gay movement for united actions. A critique of the MNU might perhaps have shaken the ideological model of the oppressed versus the orthodox left on which the antileftist wing of the movement insisted. Autonomist feminists argued along similar lines, although they made a distinction between the different kinds of leftists that the conservative wing of the gay movement rejected. The argument presented by the left wing of the movement for strategic alliances with sectors of the left and the labor movement was countered with the contention that the left was homophobic and wanted only

to manipulate the gay movement for its own political agenda and that the gay movement was too weak to work with the labor movement, which was also homophobic and hostile to any alliance. Thus, the proposal to participate in the 1980 May Day celebration in the midst of a massive strike wave in greater São Paulo split the gay movement because it challenged the isolationism of its more conservative wing. The success of the gay and lesbian contingent in the 1980 May Day march and the subsequent March of 1,000 against police repression initiated and led by Somos and its left wing reinforced the militant wing of the movement. It also provided the impetus for the historic step of opening a public headquarters, a goal discussed since 1977.

In the United States the reformist gay and lesbian movement has linked itself to the Democratic party, although in recent years the AIDS crisis has produced a new generation of activists organized in groups such as ACT UP that have challenged the policies of both Democratic and Republican parties and have taken up socialist demands such as a national health care system and an end to the profit-based pharmaceutical industry. In Brazil the left wing of the gay movement tried to forge political alliances with the social movements and the Workers' party that fought for the exploited and the oppressed instead of with the liberal wing of the Brazilian ruling elite. Such political alliances are certainly a complicated proposition. Homophobia and antigay and antilesbian ideology permeate society, and the Brazilian left and labor movements are no exception. The dialectical relationship between unity and conflict or alliance and debate within that alliance over the questions of gay oppression and homophobia was the preferred tactic of the movement's left wing and especially the socialists within it.

Although the first Brazilian gay movement ran its course, homophobia and oppression have not disappeared. Authoritarian regimes in Latin America have historically resulted in a return to traditional values of the family and rigid Christian morality, as have post-1973 Chile, post-1976 Argentina, and Brazil under the military dictatorship. Homosexuals are an easy target for these regimes. The political and economic crisis of Latin America has deepened in the decade since the gay liberation movement emerged in Brazil, and there is no guarantee that the new democratic regimes in South America will be lasting ones. Therefore, the history, experiences, and lessons of the first Brazilian gay liberation movement—its tactics and strategies, its perspectives and alliances—may be of the utmost importance both for those interested in the subject for historical, political, and sociological reasons and for activists interested in seeing a new wave of the gay liberation movement in Latin America that can develop and survive.

REFERENCES

- Adam, Barry D.
1987 *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*. Boston: Twayne.
- Alvarez, Sonia E.
1990 *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bagaço
1976 "A jaula da bicha está aberta." Rio de Janeiro.
- Bittencourt, Francisco
1980a "Encontro nacional do povo gay." *Lampião da Esquina* 20 (January): 7-10.
1980b "Homossexuais: a nova força." *Lampião da Esquina* 24 (May): 4-6.
- Comissão de Homossexuais Pro-1º de Maio
1980 "Contra a intervenção nos sindicatos de São Paulo, contra a discriminação do trabalhador/a homossexual." Mimeo, São Paulo.
- Comité de Defesa do Jornal *Lampião*
1979 "Carta de Apoio." Mimeo, São Paulo.
- Cruzada Anti-Homossexualismo
1980 "Carta ao Grupo SOMOS." Mimeo, São Paulo.
- Dantas, Edwardo
1979 "Negros, mulheres, homossexuais e índios nos debates da USP." *Lampião da Esquina* 10 (March): 9-10.
- D'Emilio, John
1983 *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Facção Homossexual da Convergência Socialista
1980 "Carta aberta ao jornal *Lampião*." Mimeo, São Paulo.
1981a *Boletim* 1 (April): 1-4.
1981b *Boletim* 2 (May-June): 1-4.
1981c "Trabalho homossexual: um balance e resolução de trabalho para o próximo ano." *Boletim* (November): 1-12.
- Força Negra
1979 "Órgão de divulgação do Movimento Negro Unificado: um jornal contra a discriminação racial." No. 0 (May): 1-4.
- Frente de Liberación Homossexual
1977 "Una historia del FLH Argentino." Mimeo, Buenos Aires.
- Green, James
1979 "Liberalization on trial: the workers' movement." *NACLA Report of the Americas* 13 (May-June): 14-25.
- Keck, Margaret
1984 "Update on the Brazilian labor movement." *Latin American Perspectives* 11 (Winter): 27-36.
- Lauritsen, John and David Thorstad
1974 *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement, 1864-1935*. New York: Time Change Press.
- Moises, José Alvaro
1982 "What is the strategy of the 'New Syndicalism'?" *Latin American Perspectives* 9 (Fall): 55-73.
- Montero, Vilma, Luis Mott, and Aroldo Asunção
1981 "Homossexuais e o 1º de Maio." *Em Tempo* (May 14-27): 14.

Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais

1978a "Carta ao Sindicato dos Jornalistas Profissionais no estado de São Paulo." Mimeo, August 22.

1978b "Information sheet." Mimeo, September.

Okita, Hiro

1981 *Homossexuais: Da opressão a libertação*. São Paulo: Proposta.

Somos

1979 "Moção de apoio ao Movimento Negro Unificado contra a discriminação racial." Mimeo, November 20.

1980a "A history." Mimeo, January 1.

1980b "Puntos do principio do grupo SOMOS." Mimeo, June.

Trevisan, João S.

1986 *Perverts in Paradise*. Translated by Martin Foreman. London: GMP Publishers.

Young, Allen

1979 "Brazilian journalists rally around gay newspaper." *Gay Community News* (March): 5.