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# Introduction

by

*James N. Green and Florence E. Babb*

During the whirlwind period of the late 1970s in Brazil when opposition to the military regime was gaining strength, an underground left-wing current tested the limits of political liberalization by calling for the formation of a socialist labor-based political party. At a national meeting to chart a program for the proposed party, a participant rose to suggest that the rights of homosexuals be included among the list of democratic demands in the group's manifesto. A nascent Brazilian feminist movement, as well as black consciousness groups, had placed the issues of sexism and racism on the table, and the Brazilian left was stumbling on how to respond to social discrimination that was not simply class-based. The chair of the gathering quickly concurred with the suggestion, but in the final program the plank simply read: "We are opposed to discrimination against women, blacks, Indians, etc."

Reality has changed significantly in Latin America in the past two decades. Political movements of lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people have emerged in virtually every country on the continent. A social movement that at one time was seen as a humorous sideshow or a pale copy of the massive gay and lesbian movement in the United States has triggered national political debates about sexuality, discrimination, and the meaning of full democratic participation of all sectors in political processes. Left activists once argued that homosexuality was a product of decadent bourgeois behavior and would wither away under socialism. They have been forced to reevaluate their position. In some cases, important leaders of left political parties, such as the Brazilian Workers' party, have led parliamentary battles to impose legal sanctions against discrimination based on sexual orientation and to extend social service benefits and legal protection to same-sex domestic partners.

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Such change has not come about quickly or easily, however. Even in revolutionary social settings like Cuba and Nicaragua, self-expression and organizing among gay men, lesbians, and other sexual transgressors were forcefully suppressed before finding a degree of acceptance. The deep heterosexism and homophobia in Cuban society that were mobilized by the revolution allowed for policies and practices that have only slowly been eliminated as sexual minorities have claimed public visibility. Artistic representations of gay culture, including the widely hailed film *Strawberry and Chocolate* (*Fresa y chocolate*), and international pressure to halt oppressive practices are among the forces that have opened cultural and political spaces in recent years. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista government was not as blatantly homophobic, yet we now know of its efforts to silence lesbians and gay men who began organizing in the mid-1980s (Randall, 1993). Only in the past decade has a community formed openly and a movement been launched. Even now, a repressive sodomy law remains on the books, rarely enforced but recently used against a working-class lesbian who was arrested and, once released, was murdered by her ex-husband. In neoliberal Nicaragua, the movie *Boys Don't Cry* has played in theaters in newly built malls, challenging urban viewers to extend individual rights to "queer" members of society, and the first course in sexuality studies is being taught at the Central American University.

Throughout Latin America, the feminist movement has forced the left to rethink issues of gender and address the problems of rape, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination. Likewise, Latin American lesbian, gay, and transgendered organizations, though still small and modest in political weight, have managed to shift the political discussion about the personal and the political. The issue of discrimination against homosexuals in Latin America is no longer relegated to "etc." status but debated in the national media and among social activists from Mexico City to Buenos Aires and from Managua to Havana.

The 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City sparked a mass-based political movement in the United States that eventually led to innovative and positive studies about gay men and lesbians. At colleges and universities, professors began to offer courses on gay topics, and by the late 1980s students and faculty had initiated the process of organizing programs or centers in institutions scattered throughout the country. In the 1990s, queer studies emerged in literature departments and spread to other disciplines. Today, anyone perusing the shelves of any large urban book and espresso superstore will find hundreds of academic titles addressing myriad questions related to same-sex eroticism in an array of fields. In-depth literary, anthropological, sociological, and historical research on homosexuality in Latin America has

had a much briefer life. In the past decade, however, Latin American, European, and North American academics have begun to examine gender systems and their relationship to various forms of same-sex eroticism in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOMOPHOBIA

Anxiety about or social restriction on same-sex desire and eroticism are, of course, nothing new or particularly limited to Latin America. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 set the guidelines for biblical prohibitions against what is today termed homosexuality. Saint Paul carried that tradition into the New Testament, reaffirming Jewish proscriptions and adding the notion of sin to sexual activities between people of the same sex (Jordan, 1992; 2000; Brooten, 1996). Although the historian John Boswell has argued that until the twelfth century the church had a contradictory and at times lax policy toward policing same-sex activities, in the centuries thereafter the offices of the church, especially the Holy Inquisition, included sodomy among the transgressions that it punished by death through public burnings (Boswell, 1980). As part of the conquest of the Americas, the Catholic Church imposed its ban against sodomy on indigenous cultures while monitoring the sexual behavior of Spanish and Portuguese colonizers.<sup>2</sup> There has yet to be a complete tally of the number of people in Spanish Latin America who died by the flames. Luiz R. B. Mott (1988; n.d.) has written that during its nearly 300 years in operation, the Portuguese Inquisition, which had jurisdiction over its entire Portuguese Empire, including Brazil, Africa, and Asia, registered 4,419 denunciations in the Index of Abominations against men suspected of having practiced the “abominable and perverted sin of sodomy.” Of those denounced, 447 were arrested and underwent a formal trial—62 percent in the seventeenth century, the period of greatest antihomosexual intolerance in the Iberian peninsula. Thirty of the sodomites considered “most perverted and incorrigible” were burned at the stake.<sup>3</sup>

In the years immediately following Latin American independence from Spain and Portugal, most new states rewrote their criminal codes, eliminating sodomy from the list of legal prohibitions. This new legislation was influenced by the ideas of Jeremy Bentham, the French Penal Code of 1791, the Neapolitan Code of 1819, and the Napoleonic Code of 1810, which had decriminalized sexual relations between consenting adults (Daniel, n.d.). Although in most countries of Latin America sodomy was no longer a crime, deeply ingrained social stigmas remained in place. Moreover, state regulation of transgressive sexuality continued unabated, albeit in another form.

Vagrancy laws, public decency codes, and legal prohibitions against cross-dressing provided the police and the courts ample latitude to regulate nonnormative public behavior. The extortion of men or women found in compromising positions lined the pockets of poorly paid police and other public servants. However, money, power, or connections usually cushioned members of the upper classes from scandal and the unpleasantness of incarceration.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, eugenicists, physicians, psychiatrists, and jurists in Argentina, Brazil, and other Latin American countries engaged in campaigns to “medicalize” what increasingly became known as homosexuality, arguing that the issue was no longer merely a moral, religious, or police matter but one that required the expertise of professionals whose goals were to attempt to cure this personal and social disease. Women who desired women received less attention from these medical and legal observers, but they faced innumerable social restrictions that by and large kept them closely controlled by fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. In spite of these new approaches to the social restraint of nonnormative sexual behavior, men, who as a rule had greater access to public space and sexual partners, created a complex, semiclandestine world of desire in the major urban centers of Latin America (Salessi, 1995; Green, 1999a). An important component of this parallel, semi-invisible universe was the nurturing of multiple layers of ambiguity in public presentation that sheltered many from social ostracism. Nonetheless, those men who assumed an effeminate persona or those women who adopted masculine attire or comportment became symbols of perverse sexual transgression. The bending of gendered roles caused a generalized anxiety, since the behavior, sexual or otherwise, of men or women identified with same-sex eroticism seemed to upset constructs of the “normal” ordering of society. Moreover, the presumed passivity of effeminate men in sexual activity and the association of masculine women with “abnormal” aggressive behavior forged unilateral stereotypes of homosexuality as pathological and profoundly subversive of hegemonic norms associated with traditional gender roles.

## HOMOSEXUALITY AND POLITICS

An expansion of public social spaces for men seeking sexual and emotional relations with other men took place in the major urban centers of Latin America in the post–World War II period (Green, 1999a: 147–198; Mejía, 2000: 47; Sebrelli, 1997: 275–370). Social restraints on women, however, continued to limit their options, confining many to small circles of friends

(Sardá, 2000). Nevertheless, these forms of sociability offered an important means of everyday survival for individuals and networks of people who faced unsympathetic families, religious condemnation, and a generally hostile society and state. Within this context, in the 1950s and 1960s forms of political organization to resist or change social prejudice against homosexuality did not easily coalesce.

Nevertheless, political groups did form in post–World War II Europe and the United States. The historian John D’Emilio (1998) has documented the emergence of politicized gay and lesbian organizations in the United States in the early 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 by former members of the Communist party, understood the socially marginal status of homosexuals as comparable to the discrimination faced by racial minorities. Soon thereafter, in 1955 a group of lesbians formed the Daughters of Bilitis to address the isolation experienced by many women who found no positive role models within the hostile and homophobic McCarthy-era climate of the early 1950s. These relatively small and isolated groups provided the basis for more concerted efforts against discrimination and homophobia when civil rights and antiwar activities inspired a second wave of feminism and new politicized gay and lesbian rights organizations in the late 1960s. The Stonewall Rebellion against a police raid on a Greenwich Village gay bar, an event that is now commemorated in annual pride marches around the world, symbolized the coming of age of a new social movement.

Several months after lesbians and gay men battled the police on the streets of New York City, ten homosexuals met in a *conventillo* (tenement house) in a Buenos Aires working-class suburb to found the first Argentine gay political organization, El Grupo Nuestro Mundo (the Our World Group). Nuestro Mundo was led by a former member of the Communist party who had been expelled from the party for being a homosexual. Most other Nuestro Mundo members were activists in unions that represented lower-middle-class workers. The group’s main activity consisted of bombarding the press with mimeographed bulletins promoting gay liberation (Perlongher, 1985). Unfortunately, we have scant information about Nuestro Mundo and the first two years of political organization in Argentina. It appears, however, that the genesis of the group was not in any way directly linked to the events taking place in New York City that same year, nor is there any indication that the Argentine activists had any knowledge of the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the United States when the group was founded in November 1969.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that a man who had been a member of the Communist party led Nuestro Mundo. No doubt this was related to the fact that Argentine leftists had extensive experience in operating clandestinely or semiclandes-

tinely in a country that moved between short periods of democratic rule and military governments. The tradition of underground organizing among both Communists and Peronists provided a convenient model for homosexual activists interested in organizing against discrimination and oppression. As the histories of the early gay and lesbian movements throughout Latin America are written, we will likely discover that virtually all of the initial groups of the early 1970s and 1980s had among their initial founders and leaders former members of the Communist party, dissident groups that had split from the Communist party, or other left-wing formations.<sup>6</sup>

The Marxist-Leninist concept of encouraging vanguard political action in the name of the not yet politically conscious working class also easily translated into the notion of forming an organization that would serve to raise the consciousness of members of the gay subculture of Buenos Aires. The very name of the new organization, *Nuestro Mundo*, suggests the specificity and uniqueness of the experience of homosexuals as well as their transnational possibilities, separated in their own demimonde yet capable of affirming an identity and moving toward political awareness and the fight for social change.<sup>7</sup>

Similar groups of gay men and lesbians sprang up in Mexico and Puerto Rico in the early 1970s in the context of a worldwide political upsurge (Mejía, 2000: 49-51; Negrón-Munaner, 1992). The student revolts of 1968 propelled a new generation into social protests. The expansion of the counterculture beyond the borders of the United States and Western Europe affected the growing middle classes of Latin America. New styles and more informal comportment problematized certain aspects of rigid gender role representation (especially regarding hair, clothing, and other personal presentations) while promoting individual freedom and self-expression. An emergent international feminist movement offered a systematic critique of patriarchy and gender hierarchy while providing new forums in which women could develop political and leadership skills.

The urban homosexual cultures of Mexico City, San Juan, and Buenos Aires provided fertile ground for developing gay and lesbian movements within this maelstrom of political revolt of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, it should be no surprise that one of the groups to form in Mexico in 1978, the Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action), adopted the language and symbolism of the left. Likewise, in Argentina, activists formed the Frente de Liberación Homosexual (Homosexual Liberation Front—FLH) in 1971 as a coalition of four separate groups. At that time, many of its members had turned toward the left wing of the Peronist movement, with its vision of an anti-imperialist struggle for national liberation and social justice. They did so in a period of extreme

politicalization when mass-based mobilizations had toppled a military government and opened the way for the return of Perón to the presidency after an 18-year exile. The fact that these activists chose to name their new coalition the Argentine Homosexual Liberation Front indicates how much they were influenced by the national political debate. Left-wing Peronists, pro-Castro guerrilla organizations, and the Argentine Communist party all framed their political discourse in the context of a struggle to free the country from imperialist domination. Whereas the New York Gay Liberation Front borrowed its name from the Vietnamese National Liberation Front as a reflection of an identification with an international political struggle of another people in another society, the language of national liberation in Argentina related to the immediate political aspirations of one's own country and its people.

The analogy between liberation from foreign oppression and liberation from sexual oppression linked the national body to the physical body. The first of ten points of agreement of the Argentine Homosexual Liberation Front, written in May 1972, declares: "Homosexuals are socially, culturally, morally, and legally oppressed. They are ridiculed and marginalized, harshly suffering the absurdity of the brutality imposed upon them by monogamous heterosexual society." The manifesto continues: "The struggle against the oppression that we suffer is inseparable from the struggle against all other forms of social, political, cultural, and economic oppression." The political commitment to the entire body politic remains emphatic: "The FLH is not, nor will it become, distanced from social and national struggles. It is in solidarity with them, maintaining its organic independence and its specific objectives." The rhetoric that connects the personal and sexual to the social and political is articulated in the context of a gender-based hierarchy in which the male is conflated with the boss: "This oppression comes from a social system that considers reproduction as the only objective of sex. Its concrete expression is the existence of a compulsory system of inter-human relations where the male plays the role of the authoritarian boss and the women and homosexuals of both sexes are considered inferior and repressed." In the eyes of many members of the FLH, sexual liberation and national liberation were part of the same struggle and the Peronist concept of *justicialismo* was malleable enough, in the minds of these activists, to include the struggle of homosexuals. Thus, the Peronist slogan "So that love and equality will reign among the people," injected with a new meaning, became the symbolic bridge between the working-class-based mass movement welcoming the future reign of Perón in power and a movement that claimed "the right to use one's body . . . denied in a system of relationships based on domination where a person [*hombre*] is just another piece of merchandise." Later turns of the political tide in Argentina would discourage a linkage with left-wing

Peronism, and the component groups of the FLH turned toward other avenues for promoting greater freedom for lesbian and gay men in Argentine society.<sup>8</sup>

With the death of Perón on July 1, 1974, the right wing of the Peronist movement consolidated its power through manipulation of the government of Isabel Perón.<sup>9</sup> The deep economic, political, and social crisis that shook the country had a profound effect on the FLH. By mid-1975 the group was reduced to no more than 30 militants, and it dissolved in June 1976 in the aftermath of the March military coup d'état. The new government unleashed a wave of repression that resulted in thousands of deaths, including many homosexuals.<sup>10</sup>

During these tumultuous years of the early lesbian and gay rights movement in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Argentina, three of Latin America's more urbanized and industrialized countries, small groups debated ideas emanating from an emerging international movement and struggled to create authentic endogenous expressions of social and political action. Notably absent from this process was Brazil, with its lively gay male subculture—most prominently expressed during Carnival—and its growing yet more clandestine manifestations of lesbian sociability. While incipient movements struggled to survive in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and San Juan, Brazilian gays and lesbians were living under the most repressive years of the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. In December 1968 the governing generals closed down the Congress, suspended constitutionally guaranteed rights, increased press censorship, and stepped up the arrest and torture of those who opposed military rule. Although homosexual men and women were not specifically targeted by the dictatorship, the increased numbers of military police in the street, the arbitrary rule of law, and the generalized clamp-down on artistic and literary expression all created a climate that discouraged the emergence of a Brazilian lesbian or gay rights movement in the early 1970s (Green, 1999b; 2000a). By the middle of the decade, however, the combination of economic difficulties and mounting opposition to the government by students, political figures, and a newly energized labor movement had shifted the balance of power in the country. Facing the possibility of a social explosion, the ruling generals orchestrated a controlled political liberalization that in turn was accelerated by successive strike waves in São Paulo, the country's economic center. Within this ebullient period of gradual political openings between 1977 and 1981, new social movements emerged, most notably the Movimento Negro Unificado (United Black Movement), which questioned the traditional portrayal of Brazil as a racial democracy; a feminist movement, which confronted the sexism of both the orthodox left and Brazilian society at large; and a lesbian and gay rights movement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the return to democratic rule of most Latin American countries that had been controlled by military dictatorships opened up new possibilities for political organizing. Just as the Brazilian movement flourished under these freer conditions, so did new groups in virtually every country across the continent. In some cases, activism around AIDS education, prevention, and assistance sparked the formation of gay groups, at times with significant support from lesbians, that also articulated issues about discrimination, violence against homosexuals, and homophobia. The international feminist movement and the Latin American Lesbian and Feminist Gatherings (Encuentros) encouraged women in various countries to form national groups (Mogrovejo, 2000). Among the challenges of these new organizations has been changing social attitudes about homosexuality while building alliances and crafting political strategies to leverage changes in legislation and government policies. Once again, issues related to forging relationships with the Latin American left have come to the forefront.

### THE MARXIST LEFT AND (HOMO)SEXUALITY

Prior to the rise of Nazism, the German Social Democratic party supported Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's campaign to abolish Paragraph 175 of the German Constitution, which criminalized male homosexuality. The international communist movement that emerged after the 1917 Russian Revolution had a worse track record. When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, they abrogated all tsarist laws, and the first Soviet criminal code, enacted in 1922, did not penalize sex between consenting adult men. Nevertheless, men and sometimes women were tried for alleged homosexual activity. Among the consequences of Stalin's rise to power in the late 1920s was a 1934 statute that recriminalized sex between consenting adult males with a penalty of three to five years' incarceration. Women were not mentioned in the new statute. Homosexuality came to be associated with upper-class men and "bourgeois decadence," and this ideology permeated the international communist movement (Engelstein, 1995). As late as 1981, the pro-Soviet Brazilian Communist party, for example, continued to maintain that position in its official pronouncements.<sup>11</sup> Pro-Chinese and pro-Albanian Maoist groups that had considerable influence in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, among other Latin American countries, from the 1960s through the 1980s followed suit, attempting to be more orthodox Stalinists than their rivals in the pro-Soviet Communist parties by echoing the formulations that equated capitalist decadence with homosexuality.

As has been amply documented, in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Communist party did not stray far from Soviet policy regarding homosexuality (Leiner, 1992; Lumsden, 1996). Combining traditional Catholic moralism with pervasive notions of the links between same-sex eroticism and social deviancy, as well as sex tourism, Cuban leaders conflated the nonnormative behavior of Cuban men with moral weakness and lack of revolutionary zeal. The Cuban Revolution had a profound impact on generations of Latin American youth, who followed the example of the July 26th Movement and later Che Guevara's guerrilla activities in Bolivia by taking up arms against the military or authoritarian regimes that ruled much of the continent in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, traditional prejudices against homosexuality, combined with a constructed revolutionary morality that condemned same-sex activities among militants, silenced activists within the ranks of leftist organizations who had any erotic desires toward members of their own sex.

Herbert Daniel (1982), a Brazilian revolutionary leader of the guerrilla organization *Vanguardia Popular Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Popular Vanguard) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, later described the internal repressive climate of his organization that would have made revelations of his own sexual desires impossible. Both the traditional pro-Soviet or pro-Chinese Communist parties, with their emphasis on building a base within the working class, and the new wave of revolutionary organizations inspired by the Cuban Revolution shared the view that homosexuality was alien to working-class and middle-class revolutionaries. Many political refugees from Latin America's repressive regimes took these values with them into exile. In 1975 the Chilean *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left—MIR) held a meeting in the San Francisco Bay Area to decide whether a gay activist who had been an important figure in the U.S. Chile Solidarity movement should be invited to join that organization. The political leader of the MIR's solidarity activities in the United States was unequivocal: "En el MIR, no hay maricones" (In the MIR, there are no faggots).<sup>12</sup> All things considered, the MIR should not be singled out as the only Latin American revolutionary organization with prejudices against lesbian and gay leftists. The attitude of this leader, while unsuccessfully contested by other members of that organization at the time, has remained hegemonic throughout the Marxist left in Latin America until recent years.

Before the 1990s, noted exceptions to the pervasive homophobia of the Latin American left have been individuals or currents within disparate semianarchist, libertarian, or social democratic organizations, on one hand, and some of the Trotskyist formations, on the other. As early as 1978, lesbians and gay men within the Mexican *Partido Revolucionario de los*

Trabajadores (Revolutionary Workers' party) and the Brazilian *Convergência Socialista* (Socialist Convergence) had organized internal caucuses and participated in the emerging lesbian and gay movements in those two countries, including, in the case of Brazil, initiating work within the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' party) in its formative stages in 1980-1981 (Green, 1994). European Trotskyists and the Socialist Workers' party in the United States had begun supporting the rapidly expanding lesbian and gay movements in the early 1970s, offering an example, some theoretical guidance, and legitimacy for Trotskyists attempting to initiate similar work in Latin America. While these activities were by no means enthusiastically embraced by the leadership of their respective organizations, the gay and lesbian militants within the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* and the *Convergência Socialista* played an important part in building links between progressive sectors of the emergent lesbian and gay movements and sectors of the Latin American left and laying the groundwork for the coalitions and tactical alliances of the 1990s. The formation of a group of gays and lesbians within the Brazilian Workers' party in 1992 and the leadership role of certain Workers' party politicians in introducing domestic partnership and antidiscrimination legislation in the Congress and other legislative bodies owe much to these pioneering efforts of the late 1970s. Likewise, lesbian and gay activists from the United States and Europe who traveled to Nicaragua in the 1980s to support the revolutionary initiatives of the Sandinistas encouraged the formation of the Nicaraguan movement (Babb, 2001: 229-239; Mogrovejo, 2000: 82-84; Randall, 1993: 91-109). The revolutionary process in Central America, in turn, played a crucial role in forging a generation of gay and especially lesbian activists (Thayer, 1997).

## NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, IDENTITY, AND CLASS

Why, then, has it taken so long for the Latin American left to understand and integrate the principal demands of the Latin American lesbian and gay movements into its political programs and concrete activities? Beyond the replication of religious, cultural, and worn-out Stalinist formulations, there is a theoretical underpinning to the reluctance to embrace the issues raised by lesbian and gay activists. Essentially, so the argument goes, the Marxist left must support class-based alliances rooted in the working class. Since the contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered movement is multiclass in composition, some Marxists argue that it could, at times, run at cross-purposes to the "interests" of the working class and its organizations. Similar reservations or challenges have been articulated about the women's, ecology,

and other “new social movements” that flourished in the period of transition from dictatorial to democratic rule in many countries of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. The subtext of this argument is a continued denial of the existence of homosexuality in the popular sectors and the working class, at least as a natural and healthy expression of emotions, sexuality, or desire, as well as a lingering notion that homosexuality is a “bourgeois” deviation. A corollary is a rejection of homosexuality’s political importance and the relegation of sexual desire to the bedroom and the private sphere. Ultimately, it is the inability of many Marxist revolutionaries to imagine a more complex world than one in which everything is reduced to economic determinism. In such a limited view, the working class is incapable of recognizing multiple forms of desire within it and moving beyond crass stereotypes rooted in prescriptive notions of gender and sexuality.

The criticism of the multiclass nature of the lesbian and gay movement by elements of the Marxist left is specious at best. For decades the communist parties of Latin America and all of their offshoots have had no theoretical or practical problem in building tactical and at times strategic alliances with “progressive” or “anti-imperialist” sectors of the “national” bourgeoisie. Moreover, anyone familiar with the reality of the lesbian and gay movement in any given country knows that it is the rare bourgeois figure who chooses to risk personal comfort or conformity to engage in sexual politics. The overwhelming majority of activists in most countries are of poor working- and lower-middle-class origin, although many organizations are led by individuals from more solidly middle-class backgrounds. Although a form of consumerism has crept into the larger pride marches of Mexico City and São Paulo, it hardly reflects the reality of the day-to-day activities of most groups. Indeed, the left-wing activists within the movement have assumed the important role of making sure that poor and working-class sectors were not marginalized as political organizing has expanded.

In June 2001 at the first National Plenary Meeting of Gays and Lesbians of the Brazilian Workers’ party held on the eve of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered pride march in São Paulo, José Genoíno, the leader of the Workers’ party delegation in the lower house of the Congress, spoke to the hundred activists gathered for the event. Having defended in Congress the proposed law that would grant same-sex partners legal rights as well as legislation to extend constitutional protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, he was warmly welcomed at the plenary meeting. However, in his remarks he insisted that unlike other movements, the lesbian and gay movement was not a “movimento popular” (popular movement). The more than 200,000 people who paraded down Paulista Avenue the next day chose to ignore his assessment of reality. Yet, the inability of significant

sectors of the left to understand the political impact of the democratic struggle for full rights for lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people suggests that they are still caught in nineteenth-century thinking when the world is zooming into the twenty-first century. Comandante Marcos of the Zapatista Liberation Front has at least made gestures of inclusion in his references to lesbians and gays in some of his declarations, but his pronouncements unfortunately remain the exception to the rule.

### **THE CHALLENGE FOR THE LATIN AMERICAN LEFT**

Genoíno appeared alongside Marta Suplicy, the Workers' party mayor of São Paulo and the person who spearheaded legislative initiatives in favor of lesbian and gay rights in the Brazilian Congress, high atop the leadoff sound truck for the 2001 pride parade. Yet, the myopia of not perceiving the political significance of the upsurge in the lesbian, gay, and transgendered movement reflects a deeper anxiety concerning the implications of fully embracing the demands articulated by this movement. Ultimately, accepting those who engage in socially transgressive sexual activities contests normative notions of properly gendered behavior. It means abandoning profoundly ingrained religious and moral teachings, and it requires taking up the challenge of having to disagree with those who cling to traditional notions of appropriate comportment. For many Latin American leftists who have not come from working-class backgrounds but aspire to lead the working class, the tendency is to want to adapt to what are thought to be "working-class" values or views. For those from the outside who want to be on the inside in order to play the role of vanguard leadership, it is far easier to assume the mantle of a supposed working-class "authenticity" than to hold positions that are not immediately embraced by all.

The equation, however, has changed as movements throughout Latin America have set their own agendas and upset the rules of the game. The politics of "coming out," insisting that the personal is political, and challenging heteronormativity have empowered tens of thousands of activists from Guadalajara to Minas Gerais. The dictum that a society can be judged by its treatment of women has now been supplemented by the assertion that a democratic society will be judged by its acceptance of lesbians, gays, and transgendered people. The socialist society that most Latin American leftists still aspire to as their long-range goal is predicated on the notion of the expansion of full rights to the poor and working-class and the elimination of poverty, hunger, and exploitation. Yet any society that does not defend the most

intimate rights to pleasure is a society that can easily become authoritarian, bureaucratic, and ultimately reactionary.

In general terms, one could say that the left in Latin America has still not recovered from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Sandinista electoral defeat in Nicaragua, and the impact of neoliberal policies on national economies. The past decade has been a time of rethinking the past and taking on the new challenges of a much more complex future. It is no longer the role of lesbian, gay, and transgendered activists to initiate the inclusion of their movement's agenda within the program of the left. Rather, it is incumbent upon the left as a whole to take the lead.

### FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

This issue addresses questions related to the social construction of gender and sexuality and the impact of discrimination on the lives of those who express sexual desire for members of their own sex. Taken together, the articles have a strong interdisciplinary character, drawing from literary studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, and history. As will be evident, far less research and writing on same-sex sexuality has focused on women than on men in Latin America. To some degree this reflects the more open sexuality of men in the region, but self-identified and open lesbians have played important parts in social and political activism, and their experience and participation demand greater notice. We expect that by the time *Latin American Perspectives* brings out its next issue on same-sex desire and politics the gender balance will better reflect current social realities.

We open with an article that considers sexual practices and their cultural consequences in colonial Latin America. Pete Sigal considers the power dynamics surrounding gender and sexuality in colonial Yucatán, suggesting that understanding these dynamics is key to our interpretation of the broad control of the Maya people by Spaniards. He is careful to note the differences in sexual ethos between indigenous elites and commoners of the time as the sexual paradigms of Mayans and Spaniards collided.

Lynn Stephen's long-term research in Oaxaca has examined contemporary gender relations in depth and here turns to examine sexuality as well. She considers her ethnographic findings from two Zapotec towns in which class and ethnicity were as important as gender and sexuality in the formation of identity and status differences. Noting the variety of sexual behaviors among both women and men, she argues against any unitary regional sexuality and for a historically informed view of past, present, and future sexual lives. Similarly, Mara Viveros Vigoya's study of Colombian sexual systems analyzes

how racial and gender notions intertwine in the construction of masculinity and femininity. Often, as she shows, anxiety about and fear of homosexuality shape “appropriate” and transgressive sexual and social behavior.

Among the subjects of recent gay and lesbian literature about same-sex desire in Latin America has been the role of artists and writers who have courageously identified themselves through their work, sometimes necessitating living in exile as a way to deal with second-class citizenship. Rafael Ocasio examines the case of the well-known Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, who lived in exile in the United States until his suicide in 1990. Further research will need to explore to what degree the changing sensibility within Cuba now allows for freer creative expression and greater inclusion in a diverse society. Diana Palaversich discusses the life and work of the Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel, considering his writing in relation to homosexuality in Latin America and his reception as a writer and performance artist among gay Chileans. As she notes, this writer’s militant stance as both homosexual and proletarian has often put him at odds with gays seeking to identify with globalized Western culture. His insistence on an oppositional culture that recalls both the Pinochet dictatorship and the postcolonial present, along with his persona as a *loca* with exaggerated femininity, marks a daring departure from the usually more masculinist gay culture.

Stephen Brown examines the dynamic of the gay and lesbian movement as it reemerged in Argentina in 1984 after the military had withdrawn from power. The human rights movement that had pushed for democracy became the reference point for a new generation of activists, as gays, lesbians, and bisexual and transgendered individuals forged a new social movement based on personal autonomy and identity. In recent years, Brazilian lesbians, gay men, transvestites, and transgendered people have been at the forefront in organizing political responses to homophobia, discrimination, and violence. This is reflected in the Seventeenth International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Conference hosted in Rio de Janeiro in 1995 and the Latin American Region Conference of ILGA that took place in that same city in 2000. The 2001 pride parade in São Paulo was by far the largest such public mobilization in Latin America and the fifth largest in the world. Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Júnior and Rodrigo Ceballos shift the traditional gaze of academics away from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to investigate the cultural transformations in same-sex desire and sociability that have taken place in the Brazilian Northeast over the past 20 years. The intersection of an international movement and national organizing created new identities and social spaces for same-sex erotic interactions with contours constructed in ways unique to that region of Brazil.

Finally, David William Foster places homoerotic identity within the framework of an exile community of Latin American male writers living in the United States and Europe. His article demonstrates how the writers' diasporic experiences have shaped their identities and practices, adding another dimension to our understanding of gay Latin American lives and creative endeavors. The social and historical influences of the writers' countries of origin and exile are considered in Foster's analysis as he goes beyond texts to contexts of life experience. This work serves as a fitting conclusion to this collection of articles as we look beyond single nations and regions to view the increasingly transnational, globalized effects of changing cultural politics on same-sex desire and identity. Until now, much of our research and writing has argued for an analysis of sexual politics that avoids Eurocentrism and is particularly attentive to distinct local cultural meanings and practices. To follow the latest currents, however, we must now be willing to consider the flows of individuals, cultural products, information, technologies, and political movements across borders that are fast altering sexual landscapes in Latin America and beyond. This is very likely the direction many of us will take to further our understanding of local, national, and global intersections of gender, sexuality, and power.

## NOTES

1. Among the works not cited elsewhere in this essay, we may begin with early studies such as Taylor (1978) and Fry (1982). Carrier (1995) carried out two and a half decades of research in Mexico and represents a scholar from this first generation. Other works include Foster (1991), Parker (1991; 1999), Lancaster (1992), Leiner (1992), and Quiroga (2000). Anthologies on gay and lesbian subjects include Foster (1994), Bergmann and Smith (1995), Murray (1995), Balderston and Guy (1997), Molloy and Irwin (1998), and Chávez-Silverman and Hernández (2000). Some recent attention has gone to examining transgender/transvestism, as in the work of Prieur (1998) and Kulick (1998).

2. There continues to be a scholarly debate on the extent and meaning of same-sex sexual practices among the different indigenous cultures of the Americas. For two divergent views, see Trexler (1995) and Roscoe (1998). For a collection of articles about Spanish and Portuguese Colonial Latin America, see Sigal (n.d.).

3. For the Portuguese Inquisition's treatment of Brazilian women engaged in same-sex eroticism, see Belini (1987). For an overview of European colonial visions of same-sex desire and sexuality, see Bleys (1995).

4. For histories of the movements in Europe, see Adam et al. (1999).

5. Néstor Perlongher, who joined the movement after the formation of the Homosexual Liberation Front (FLH) in 1971, wrote a brief history of the Argentine movement after it had collapsed in 1976 on the eve of the military takeover of the government. His work is the most complete narrative to date of the history of the movement, yet it is by its very nature—a six-page

mimeographed account distributed clandestinely in a climate of political repression—a sketchy version of the events that took place between 1969 and 1976.

6. As mentioned previously, the Mattachine Society in the United States was also founded by members and sympathizers of the Communist party, but its initial ideological framework was more heavily shaped by the emergent civil rights movement and the Communist party's analysis of the role of oppressed minorities in organizing to eliminate discrimination and prejudice. Both pointed toward a social movement based on a democratic discourse demanding equal rights under the law. In Argentina and the rest of Latin America, where the left did not have a tradition of political mobilization around broad demands for individual civil rights—seen as bourgeois and not working-class demands—such issues took a back seat to an emphasis on working-class and anti-imperialist struggles.

7. Gay life in Buenos Aires also operated in that liminal space between legality and marginality. A discernible gay subculture had developed in the nation's capital in the late 1950s, revolving around clubs, restaurants, public restrooms, movie theaters, public parks, and sidewalk cafes that provided a meeting ground for homosexuals to socialize and have sexual encounters. The new political movement that sought to challenge hegemonic and normative notions of sexuality was forced, much as was the left, to initiate its activities under a veil of protection, secrecy, and discretion. Although the concept of an identification and solidarity with nonhomosexuals was not embedded in the group's name, its preoccupation with the working class and trade unions continued over the next few years as *Nuestro Mundo* joined with other groups to form the FLH.

8. For a more complete analysis of the FLH's relationship with the Argentine left, see Green (2000b).

9. The growing radicalization of Argentine labor and youth and the tremendous growth of the guerrilla movements led to a campaign of repression headed by right-wing paramilitary squads such as the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA). On February 12, 1975, *El Caudillo*, a profascist weekly supported by AAA founder Carlos López Rega, the minister of social welfare and chief adviser to President Isabel Perón, published an article titled "Acabar con los homosexuales" (Finish Off the Homosexuals). The piece called for the lynching of homosexuals and specifically mentioned the FLH. In response, the FLH issued a public statement entitled "Fascism Threatens Us" that was distributed in Argentina and published in the gay press around the world (*Frente de Liberación Homosexual*, 1975). In August 1975 the FLH expressed appreciation for the campaign of international solidarity after the publication of the article in *El Caudillo*. The bulletin also stated: "Because of the clandestinity in which we operate, letters should be sent to the FLH in care of the National Gay Task Force in New York" (*Somos*, August 1975: 37).

10. The FLH was an organization made up mostly of people from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds with modest means. The galloping inflation in the final months of the Isabel Perón government devastated the membership, making economic survival a key priority. When the FLH attempted to win support among gays in Buenos Aires after the right-wing attacks, it found itself isolated from most people who frequented the city's gay spaces. The group turned to closed study groups while continuing to make contact with the international gay movement, particularly organizations in Italy, Spain, France, Britain, Australia, and the United States.

11. See the interview with a representative of the Brazilian Communist party in Okita (1981: 63-73).

12. This incident took place in the San Francisco Bay Area and involved a gay activist who had been a national leader in the Chilean Solidarity movement since the military coup d'état toppled the Allende regime on September 11, 1973, and had organized "Gay Solidarity with the Chilean Resistance," an evening of political and cultural activities in San Francisco on the second anniversary of the military takeover that brought together over 350 members of the Bay Area

lesbian and gay community and raised \$1,000 (a considerable sum at the time) for the international solidarity movement.

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