

## **Homosexual Identities in Transitional Brazilian Politics**

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### ***The Cultural Struggle Against the Regime and the Democratic Opening***

At the end of the 1970s, Brazilians began to breathe a more optimistic air. For many, the nation was at the threshold of a new era, more just and more humane. The resurgence of civil society, coupled with the military regime's decision to curb the coercive apparatus, heralded great transformations. Workers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and students rose in protest.

In May of 1978, metalworkers staged a massive strike in the greater São Paulo region. This vigorous demonstration of the power of the labor movement immediately expanded to numerous other categories. As the sociologists Sebastião C.V. Cruz and Carlos E. Martins said of that period, "With the strike in the ABC [the location of the automobile industry in Santo André, São Bernardo, and São Caetano], and with the movement that it precipitated, an enormous space was opened in the field of ideas and in the political imaginary. Suddenly, the realm of the possible was expanded, the new began to sprout" (Cruz and Martins 1983: 59). Wage policy and antistrike legislation, master pillars of the military regime after 1964, fell into disarray. The government seemed disposed to abdicate its tutelage over the relationship between business and labor. Shortly thereafter, the idea of a workers' party emerged.

In June of 1978, President Ernesto Geisel announced new reforms that eliminated the most distinctly arbitrary instruments of the draconian authoritarian legislation in effect. He was careful, however, not to significantly weaken the security and intelligence forces who had defeated militant movements and guerrilla groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The manner of contesting the status quo, nevertheless, began to change. Old discourses on "the people" and "their struggle" were left aside. Youth, students, and intellectuals began to emphasize questions relating to the subversion of values and the behavior of the challengers themselves. Matters like sexuality, the use of drugs, the underground press, and psychoanalysis were now discussed. The traditional values and practices of the Left began to be viewed as conservative. Opting in favor of marginality came to be seen as the main form of attack on

“the system.” As Heloisa Buarque de Holanda put it, “The use of drugs, bisexuality, the decolonialized behavior were ‘lived’ and felt as dangerous, illegal gestures and, as a result, were taken as a challenge of a political nature” (1980: 68).

When the student movement began to reorganize in the late 1970s, its meetings became important forums for the discussion of new positions. Students questioned old ideals of opposition unity, challenging the Left’s notion that unity was essential to the “general struggle” and arguing that differences on “specific matters” should no longer be relegated to a secondary plane. Many of the themes raised would subsequently be taken up again by new movements, such as the feminist and homosexual movements. Power, understood in a generic sense, was rejected and condemned wherever it appeared, be it in the institutional form of government agencies, in the structure of the political parties, or in the day-to-day relationships between individuals—such as those between parents and children, teachers and students, owners and employees, married couples, and lovers.

Against the dictates of power, the pleasure of the individual was deemed the greater good. Wherever pleasure was absent, the effects of authoritarianism (also called fascism, racism, or machismo, almost indiscriminantly) were detected. As a result, one of the most serious accusations that could be leveled against any political assembly, such as those of the student movement, was that it had become bureaucratic and tedious.

The moralism of the orthodox Left became one of the principal targets of this new criticism. The Left had not yet begun to assimilate the new postures of the Brazilian youth, especially those stemming from the sexual liberty made possible by the advent of the birth control pill and other factors. Sexual relations outside marriage, along with homosexuality and drug use, were severely repressed within orthodox Left organizations. Indeed, militants who engaged in such activities faced expulsion from their organizations. Even a preference for foreign music, such as soul, funk, and rock, was attacked, considered “alien” or “suspect” by the leftists of the old guard.

As the regime’s political liberalization made more open activities possible for the various clandestine leftist organizations and as the end of press censorship spurred more open debate, the ideal of unity among opposition forces proved ever less viable. Classical divisions among Marxists resurfaced, and new groups with specific claims began to appear as well. Particularly outstanding were the black and feminist movements. The problems of blacks and women and their methods of collective action went far beyond the questions classically considered political. Both movements were also concerned with issues previously considered cultural or related to the day-to-day experiences of political militants—hierarchical relationships between the races, between men and women, and even between the political leaders and the rank and file within leftist organizations themselves.

Blacks as well as women had a long history of struggle, formerly aimed at achieving the full rights of citizenship that had been systematically denied them. However, in the postwar years and especially after 1964, these campaigns dissipated and the black and feminist struggles were ignored, not only by the elite in power but by opposition groups as well. The transformations that occurred in

society beginning in the 1970s led blacks and women to take up some of their old demands and raise new claims. Finding little support from most existing political groups (including some on the Left who deemed such struggles “secondary”), blacks and women elaborated new theories and new autonomous strategies for action. Due to shared political grievances and organizational dynamics, they would become the interlocutors and privileged allies of militant homosexual groups, who, like them, did not see any basis for downgrading their specific demands regarding their own immediate problems because they held minority status.

A new societal tendency began to manifest itself with particular intensity within the Left. It consisted of the revalorization of problems specific to certain sectors whose difficulties had been, until then, relegated to secondary positions within a Left that had focused exclusively on the “class struggle.” The black movement, by emphasizing the additional oppression suffered by workers of African origin, shattered the idea of a great working class united by the same capitalist exploitation. The feminist movement, for its part, called attention to forms of sexist discrimination present in the methods of leftist militancy and other types of oppression beyond the purely economic. It can be said that feminists perhaps legitimized values that were formerly disdained by groups of the Marxist-Leninist persuasion.

### *The Homosexual Movement*

With the relative easing of censorship in 1979, Brazil’s first homosexual newspaper, *Lampião*—edited in Rio de Janeiro by homosexual journalists, intellectuals, and artists—appeared in the nation’s newsstands. *Lampião* originally intended to deal frankly with homosexuality and attempted to forge alliances with other “minorities,” that is, blacks, feminists, Indians, and those in the ecological movement. Although this proposed alliance did not fully materialize, the newspaper certainly was of great significance to the extent that it systematically grappled with the homosexual question in its political, existential, and cultural aspects in a positive, not pejorative, manner.

In 1979, despite the relaxation of censorship and the fact that homosexuality was not even mentioned in the Brazilian Penal Code, Rio police launched an inquiry against the editors of *Lampião*. They were accused of violating press legislation by going against “morality and good customs.” Despite the fact that these police and juridical acts were shelved after complicated legal procedures, the *Lampião* editors endured months of intimidation and humiliation. They were saved partly because of support received from the Journalists Union, whose lawyers defended them. Such support was a clear sign that homosexuality had ceased to be an object of scorn and that the legitimacy of homosexual demands had begun to be recognized.

The year 1978 also saw the birth of the so-called Unified Black Movement, the full blossoming of the feminist movement, and the rapid growth of the first nuclei of the homosexual movement in Brazil. Soon after the launching of *Lampião*, a group of artists, intellectuals, and liberal professionals, unhappy with

a social life restricted to bars in homosexual “ghettos,” began to meet weekly in São Paulo. Initially planning to discuss the social and personal implications of their sexual orientation, these individuals made their first public demonstration in an open letter to the Journalists Union, protesting the defamatory form with which “the yellow press” presented homosexuality.

In February 1979, the members of this group, already calling itself SOMOS—*Grupo de Afirmação Homossexual* (“We Are—Homosexual Affirmation Group”), appeared in public during a debate on minorities sponsored at the University of São Paulo. There, they established contact with other groups that had begun to discuss the question of homosexuality, and the idea of a future Brazilian homosexual movement was implanted. This debate also established the importance of the homosexual movement as a legitimate interlocutor in the discussion of national issues. In addition, it was a cathartic experience that increased the confidence of the participants and gave impulse to the formation of similar groups in São Paulo and other cities.

The example of the São Paulo group SOMOS and the influence of *Lampião* produced results. During the summer of 1980, a meeting of several homosexual groups that had formed in different states to promote homosexual militancy was held in São Paulo. Among the topics discussed, the following stood out: the question of homosexual identity, relations within the homosexual movement, political parties, procedures, and organization. Although there were plenty of polemics and expressions of different points of view, a generalized antipathy toward any form of authoritarianism became evident, be it within political parties (of the Right and of the Left), in relationships between men and women, or between people of the same sex. The proposed solutions emphasized, then, the autonomy of the homosexual movement in relation to political parties and support for feminism in the struggle against machismo. In a similar vein, the reproduction of machismo in homosexual relationships was criticized. Against the “active/passive,” “dominator/dominated” dichotomy, participants proposed a new homosexual identity premised on essentially egalitarian sexual/affective relationships.

Though until now I have spoken of homosexual movements as such, I cannot fail to speak of the so-called homosexual ghetto, which has also been called the homosexual *movimentação* and which serves as background to the movement and directly affects a much greater number of people. The ghetto typically consists of a downtown area where certain bars, saunas, nightclubs, public baths, and parks act as contact points for homosexuals. In addition to this central area, there are other areas of homosexual conglomeration and cruising, smaller and spread out in upper-class neighborhoods as well as in working-class areas.

In fact, it was not the homosexual movement that initiated the reformulation of the old view of homosexuals as effeminate young men and masculine women. In the ghetto areas, new terms emerged in the 1960s to name increasingly common and accepted social figures—*o entendido* and *a entendida*, Brazilian equivalents to “gay.” *Entendido* and *gay* came to basically designate people who have sexual relations with people of the same sex, without necessarily adopting the attributes often associated with the demeaning terms *faggot* or *dyke*. This new terminology was not pejorative.

This new model of homosexual relationships developed in São Paulo (as well as in other large urban centers) toward the end of the 1960s, when certain downtown areas became locales frequented not only by homosexuals but also by groups of politicized bohemians. The bohemians, artists, intellectuals, and students, all opposed to the military dictatorship, frequently engaged in diverse modalities of cultural resistance and tried to subvert the regime by questioning the conservative and authoritarian values that reigned in society.

A process of mutual influence resulted from the encounter of these two outsider populations. The cultural resisters found a new field in which to act, perceiving the importance of dissolving the rigidity of the norms that governed the roles of men and women in their society. And among homosexuals, a more democratizing influence was exercised in sexual and affective relationships. Two important results of this encounter were the consolidation of the figure of the *entendido*, the homosexual who looked for egalitarian sexual relationships, and the valorization of the androgynous with regard to political positions. The strength of the latter was due in large part to the rigors of censorship in effect at that time, which predisposed the public to look for ciphered messages in the ambiguities of scripts and shows.

In terms of the *entendido* (or gay, as he is frequently known today), the former emphasis on roles determined by sexual behavior (who penetrates whom) was displaced by a more complex view of relationships. People were no longer defined as active or passive but rather as heterosexual or homosexual, thus questioning the validity of preestablished sexual roles. Very often, *entendidos* would even feel extremely ill at ease if forced to play such roles. In comparison to the old hierarchy captured by the expressions “active/passive” (*bofe/bicha*), where only the latter was stigmatized for having to serve his “macho,” the new sexual categorization was essentially egalitarian (Fry 1982: 87). Both partners were considered equally “men” and deserving of all the respect and rights of masculine citizenship.

Despite the diffusion of this gay model, the active/passive dichotomy continues to be important even today, and it is widely used by the mass media. And even in homosexual environments, the *bicha pintosa* (“screaming queen”) and the transvestite are discriminated against, and gay members of the middle class frequently try to highlight characteristics traditionally considered masculine, such as weight lifter’s muscles, mustaches, and so on.

In addition to the homosexuals who frequent the ghetto, there are many individuals who are given to sexual practices with partners of the same sex but who pursue them in a more discreet—and often furtive—manner. Many of these adhere to the traditional and hierarchical categorization of homosexuality and even consider themselves heterosexuals. This occurs frequently, for example, among the male prostitutes who repudiate a homosexual identity, in part, due to their clientele’s demands, who desire to see in the prostitutes the incarnation of a traditional ideal of “virility.” Like transvestites, these exponents of the hierarchical model of sexual categorization also suffer the contempt of other homosexuals, including their clients, as much for the fact that they are “closeted” as for their social marginalization—they frequently rob or attack their clients. In many cases, the risk they represent is itself a source of the attraction they exert (Perlongher 1987).

Currently, as a result of widespread information with respect to the homosexual world, "closet" homosexuals can maintain long-distance contact with the new developments and the new values of the ghetto. Nevertheless, the ghetto continues to be a most important center for questioning, for devising innovative sexual practices, and for developing diverse ways of thinking about them.

One of the peculiarities of the new groups that formed the homosexual movement was the rejection of the terms *entendido* and *gay*; they opted instead to designate themselves as *bichas* ("faggots"). By proposing a newly militant and aware *bicha*, the idea was to try to drain the word, as well as the concept, of its negative connotations. To call oneself *bicha* became a way to assume a homosexuality considered more "conscious" than that of the gays and the *entendidos* and a way of obliging public opinion to reconsider its attitudes toward homosexuality in general. Later, other groups would adopt other strategies, as in the case of the Grupo Gay of Bahia, which adopted the North American term.

Lesbians showed a special interest in the reproduction of machista relationships between homosexuals. This question touched women closely for two reasons. First, within the so-called lesbian ghetto, the "active/passive" (*franchona/lady*) dichotomy was extremely accentuated; roles have always been the target of criticism and attempts at transformation by the women militants of organized homosexual groups. Second, the oppression exercised over women by men was very real. Feminism had been criticizing gender roles since the mid-1970s, and lesbians now started approaching feminist groups, despite initial rejection. As a result, lesbians struggled on two fronts: against dominator/dominated relationships between the sexes and against the reproduction of such roles in the homosexual environment.

Since the February 1979 debates at the University of São Paulo, a small segment of women had been attracted to the homosexual groups, although they remained in the minority. Lesbians did not initially plead for special treatment—after all, as I will show, an ideology of total equality prevailed within the homosexual movement. But they soon began to feel the need for at least a subgroup exclusively for women, where they could discuss their specific problems in greater depth. Issues specific to lesbians were difficult to address at meetings where gay men predominated. It was this perceived need that prompted lesbian activists to seek closer contact with the feminist groups active in São Paulo since the mid-1970s.

Among lesbian participants in the homosexual movement, a sharpened sensitivity to the subtleties of machismo resulted from this contact. Despite the ideology of equality, it became evident to lesbian activists that, even among homosexual militants, it was men who dominated group discussions and decision-making. Furthermore, women complained of the barely disguised misogyny in jokes and treatment by gay men. Especially irritating to them was the frequent use of the pejorative term *racha* ("slit") to designate any woman, as well as many men's habit of treating each other as if they themselves were women. Tensions increased, and shortly thereafter, lesbian participants took advantage of a quarrel among the men that threatened the cohesion of the SOMOS group and decided to opt for total autonomy. They founded the Lesbian-Feminist Action Group in May of 1980.

At about this time, the São Paulo police chief began a moralist crusade with the goal of “cleaning up” downtown by removing the prostitutes and homosexuals in that area. The methods were the same as always—lightning strikes at meeting sites, illegal imprisonment for the investigation of criminal or political antecedents, even in the case of people whose documents were in order, and the use of an extreme brutality, especially with prostitutes and transvestites. The homosexual movement reacted, and, activating its contacts with the feminist, black, and student movements, it promoted an unprecedented march through downtown São Paulo. Almost one thousand people heeded the call to protest—prostitutes, some members of the black movement, students, feminists, and, above all, a large contingent of homosexuals who set the tone for the event through the use of satirical and campy slogans.

Gibes and derision thus entered the political scenario, which was normally dominated by much more “serious” issues. And, against the criticism of more traditional sectors of the opposition, homosexual militants maintained that the use of camp reflected the profoundly subversive and anarchic nature of the homosexual experience, always disposed to question and ridicule the sacred values of the Left as much as those of the Right.

This march represented a kind of apotheosis of homosexual militancy in São Paulo, which thereafter had to deal with the serious problems of the extinction of the newspaper *Lampião*, the splintering of several groups, and the disappearance of others. Although *Lampião* had never claimed to be the mouthpiece of the movement and had always asserted the total autonomy of its editorial line, it served as a central reference point and spread news of the activities of groups throughout the country. A climate of discouragement and distrust seemed to set in as the movement’s initial transformational project appeared less viable, and the movement found itself at a loss, with no idea of what course of action to follow next.

Due to the influence of its founders, who had strong anarchist leanings, SOMOS, from the beginning, placed itself against any hierarchical type of structure. It emphasized instead a utopian equality among its members, who even tried to negate the differences between the situation of the male homosexuals and that of the lesbians. As a result, a more informal power structure was formed, composed of those who could commit more time to the cause or those who had a better education, better speaking skills, greater beauty or popularity, and so on.

Because its very existence seemed to contradict the anarchist ideals professed by the group, this elite segment was often ignored or denied, although it exercised significant power. This informal power elite was originally composed of the founders of the group, who professed a vision of the world that could loosely be labeled “anarcho-individualist.” But after some time, this elite began to see its influence challenged by subsequent arrivals. These individuals began to meet under the leadership of a militant from a Trotskyite group, Socialist Convergence, that, according to the members of the founding elite, sought to take over SOMOS and through it exercise influence over the homosexual population. This strategy would be executed, they said, through a sector of the party political organization called the Gay Faction of the Socialist Convergence, where the homosexual

struggle was conceived of not as a priority but as subordinate to a more general class struggle.

These partisan interventions intensified the existing tensions among the members of SOMOS. Shortly after the first general meeting of Brazilian homosexual groups in 1980, when the women formalized their separation, a group of men also dissented. They allegedly wanted to reestablish the original principles of the group, which they claimed were being distorted by the excessive influence of Marxist militants.

In fact, a struggle for the control of SOMOS developed. The dissidents were those identified with the founding faction of the group, which had been losing its original position of control due to the rapid influx of new members. A series of accusations and quarrels ensued and were leaked to the press. This led to the departure of many militants in the two organizations and ultimately weakened homosexual militancy, robbing it of its capacity to excite and attract new followers.

These dissensions received much attention, and more emerged at the core of other homosexual groups. As a result, many of these groups were dissolved; the few that survived frequently promoted more specific demands within the wider context of the homosexual question.

Perhaps one of the most successful developments was the campaign to eliminate the code number 302.0 used by the Department of Social Welfare and Health, which classified homosexuality as a "mental deviation"—one of the only instances where homosexuality was officially discriminated against in Brazil. Homosexual groups mounted a petition drive throughout the country, marshaling the support not only of the homosexuals but also of many other people, including numerous outstanding personalities in the scientific, artistic, and political worlds.

Declarations of support were also obtained from scientific associations, such as the Brazilian Society of Anthropology. More than a simple bureaucratic measure, this move to abolish the code was an attempt to discuss and eliminate the pathological connotation frequently attributed to homosexuality. With the purpose of rethinking homosexual identity and fighting prejudice in all its aspects, the groups' general strategy was to make homosexuality much more visible to the population at large. This the militants achieved, clearly assisted by a climate of cultural challenge already in place at the time.

### *Movement, Community, and Identity*

The 1970s witnessed, in various parts of the world, the growing importance of a "third way" for political activity. Abandoning dependence on traditional parties—of the Right as much as of the Left—new social movements emerged, with immediate purposes for the solution of specific problems. Such movements tend to have an expressive character, developing forms of experience and participation that are "lived" as positives in themselves.

Western Europe saw the development of the peace movement, movements for the defense of nature and the preservation of certain communities against the abuses of real estate speculation, and so on. In Latin America, labor organizations appeared, organized independently of (or even in opposition to) traditional unions

and political parties. Urban and rural associations were organized with the support of radical Roman Catholic church groups, claiming the right to land for housing or for cultivation. Black and Indian movements were formed, determined to make themselves heard and to act at the political level alongside women's associations, feminist groups, human rights committees, and the like. This was the context within which the homosexual movement made its appearance.

Tilman Evers called attention to certain aspects common to all such political manifestations, arguing that they always experiment with new relationships in the spheres of life that are normally divided into "public" and "private." Such movements attempt to humanize public life in the sense of making it function according to norms and values more frequently found in private life. They seek to valorize the "private," to recognize its importance as a "political" topic to be discussed and thought of on an equal footing with the other, more "general" ones. As Evers himself said, all this constitutes much more of a "state of spirit" and a possible tendency than a real practice. Nevertheless, its effects on organizational practice are quite evident. The new movements attempted to form small groups based on interpersonal relationships and strove to make debates accessible and clear to all the members of the group. New forms of grass-roots democracy were experimented with, such as the imperative mandate, rotational representation, and a plebiscitary decisionmaking process. The new movements rejected any type of grandiose, anonymous, and bureaucratic structures, like the state, for example (Evers 1983: 34). The Brazilian homosexual and feminist groups exhibit several of these characteristics.

Similar values were manifested in the proposals of the newspaper *Lampião*, as much in the negation of commercial relationships intrinsic to consumerism as in the rejection of the "ready-made schemata" of the traditional Left. Instead, *Lampião* and the homosexual groups attempted to valorize perception and action at the individual level. Yet, despite *Lampião's* repudiation of the commercialization of human relations, it was disposed to defend prostitution, thereby discarding the sacredness of sexual activity—an apparent contradiction. *Lampião* preferred to investigate how, in fact, commercialized sexual relationships occurred, and it attempted to highlight their pleasurable aspects as well. This would constitute an attempt to favor individuals and not personifications, a characteristic also attributed to those movements by Evers.

The new forms of relationships and political participation that develop within contemporary social movements represent efforts to establish an egalitarian practice that is normally implicit in the notion of "community." As Ruth Cardoso showed, the construction of that egalitarian community does not come about because of the possession of common positive attributes but rather through a shared "lack" (*carência*) or oppression. In that way, a community can be perceived as an experience of equality. Differences that may exist among the participants, such as class differences, are de-emphasized (Cardoso 1983: 32).

Thus, SOMOS required that all its members exhibit the same identity of discrimination and, on various occasions, people who did not identify primarily as homosexuals were forced to leave SOMOS meetings. The equality promoted within the group was held as a fundamental value for all aspects of its members'

lives. There was always an effort to neutralize any larger difference that emerged among them.

Although only partially successful, one of the central concerns of the group was to combat the consolidation of any type of hierarchy at its core. On several occasions, for example, even when confronted with the inefficiency of the system, the members of SOMOS reaffirmed the principle of rotating the coordinators of the subgroups, attempting to give everyone, even its less experienced members, a chance to assume positions of command. Nevertheless, this was not sufficient to prevent the crystallization of an informal leadership that, on certain occasions, used some of the supposedly libertarian aspects of the structure (such as the requirement of consensus) to avoid changes that would diminish the power of that elite.

One of the methods used to promote the feeling of community and of equality in need was the creation of consciousness-raising subgroups. Here, the life experiences of homosexuality were discussed publicly in great detail, with the declared goal of promoting a better understanding of their political significance. That process socialized individual experiences, helping to integrate what had been fragmented and enclosed in the limits of private life (see Durham 1984). As a result, participants established very intense and emotional relationships among themselves, and a strong identification among group members was created, frequently accompanied by feelings of euphoria and even of universal brotherhood, or *comunitas*.

Encountering difficulties in developing a sense of their own identity, due to the heterogeneity among homosexuals, movement participants had an easier time finding a counterpart to that identity, adopting for this the feminist concepts of "machista" or macho. Using machismo as their common enemy, homosexuals constructed for themselves a complementary identity: that of *bichas* ("faggots"). As the "macho" was also a counterpart to "feminists," these feminists, especially lesbian feminists, were also perceived to be very close to the homosexuals. The group's habit of agglomerating the men as well as the women of SOMOS in the category of *bichas* stemmed from this identification.

Nevertheless, certain differences could not be ignored for very long, and the absolute equality created by the homosexual condition was shattered by the notion of "double discrimination" (for example, that affecting individuals who were both homosexual and female or black), which served as a catalyst in the formation of new, more specific groups, such as GALF (Lesbian-Feminist Action) and the black gay group *Ade Dudu*. That segmentation was also cut across by affinity groups. These groups were connected by personal friendships, frequently based on joint participation in consciousness-raising groups or on other shared characteristics such as political orientation, level of education, preferred sexual practice, and so on.

Originally, gender differences within SOMOS were assigned little significance. That led to the initial dispersion of the few lesbian participants among the several subgroups "so that all could have the advantage of the feminist contributions." Not only were the women considered equal among themselves (they would all have contributions of the same value to make), they were also treated as if their

needs were exactly the same as the men's and were given little opportunity to elaborate specifically lesbian demands. Racial differences were also glossed over. Although these were never discussed much in São Paulo, in Salvador, a largely black city, such racial differences later gave rise to the autonomous Ade Dudu group. This group intended to act within the homosexual movement as much as in the black movement, aiming to combat the racism manifested by the former and the endemic machismo of the latter.

As was already suggested, the members of SOMOS customarily designated themselves as *bichas*, under the pretext of emptying the word of its pejorative connotations. This form of treatment among equals, using a term that would normally be considered offensive if used by a heterosexual to refer to a homosexual, was already a commonplace practice in certain homosexual circles. Nevertheless, the attempt to generalize this practice to everyone encountered strong resistance from those who, despite defining themselves as homosexuals, refused the label *bicha*. For many, the term was synonymous with *bicha louca*, a type of homosexual who emphasized effeminate mannerisms and who was frequently scorned and discriminated against by those of a more masculine appearance. The women of the group became even more irritated when their female identity was submerged by the tendency of the men in SOMOS to refer to all members as *bichas*. After many protests against that practice, which was quite difficult to eradicate, the lesbians ended up leaving the group.

Another factor differentiating the group internally was the varying degree of public exposure that members were willing to face regarding their homosexuality. In contrast with the much more furtive posture of the traditional homosexual, who tried to hide his or her sexual orientation most of the time, modern homosexuals—inhabitants of large metropolises and protected by relative anonymity—can give themselves the luxury of being more open. Nevertheless, even these individuals feel the need to take certain precautions, especially in situations where anonymity is less possible: at work, at the place of study, or, at times, in the residential neighborhood. Carmen Guimarães gave us examples of that manipulation of sexual identity, contrasting the Brazilian situation to that in the United States, where it is more common for homosexuals to feel the need to be open about their homosexuality in all situations, twenty-four hours a day. Although SOMOS had never explicitly adopted a policy of being “out” at any cost, entering the group, in practice, implied one's homosexual identity. The possibility of being called on to act publicly, to appear at demonstrations carrying signs or giving interviews intimidated many who preferred to be more discreet. These individuals consequently did not enter the group, in order to avoid exposing themselves too much.

A group such as SOMOS, which placed great emphasis on the idea that the “private” was also the “political” and should be discussed in public, became especially vulnerable to disaggregation. And because one of the basic principles of this type of organization was the outright refusal of any type of hierarchy or democratic centralism, there was no formal power that could mediate between factions in dispute. This frequently led to a rupture in the feeling of equality and belonging to one community.

Once such a sentiment is broken, groups may break up and their members disperse or form new groupings. These new groups might then establish alliances with former enemies and quarrel with former allies. Thus, the exit of the lesbians from SOMOS may be understood not only as an affirmation of political differences but also as a realignment of groups with similar affinities. The importance of personal factors may be perceived there, reinforcing the affective aspect in the internal processes of differentiation and identification.

In any case, SOMOS found itself overtaken in 1980 by a series of cleavages that outlined different groups of political interests and personal affinities. The instability of the whole was increased by the fact that there was no objective or very precise antagonist to the militant homosexual in Brazil. In contrast to the situation in the United States, here there was no legislation to be fought, and police repression against homosexuals tended to be sporadic and asystematic.

In the absence of a great, clearly defined external enemy against whom to fight, the field of disputes among homosexual groups ended up being limited to the inter- and intragroup relationships. Perhaps the most perceptible external enemies for these groups were the institutionalized political parties and the Marxist-Leninist organizations. This is because the latter had different organizational practices and methods and acted in the same oppositional field, competing, in many cases, directly with the new alternative movements, as Evers suggested.

In the case under study, this conflict occurred sharply with the Socialist Convergence and especially with its Gay Faction, which sought to apply the most traditional Leninist schema to the mobilization of the homosexuals. For SOMOS, the emphasis that group gave to the construction of a workers' party was intolerable, with its constant reference to class struggle implicitly taken as a "greater" struggle, where sexual repression served to maintain the passivity of response to the political-economic structure. After all, for many members of SOMOS, the reverse was probably the more correct view, where the political parties themselves would be perceived to be the promoters of the repression of pleasure.

The departure of the lesbians from SOMOS, which simply formalized an already existing differentiation between men and women that was more or less accepted within the group, was legitimized by the same arguments of "specificity of struggle" (*especificidade*) used by homosexual militants in general. Nevertheless, quarrels among the men, where differences were more difficult to delineate, were justified by the dissidents as stemming from the interference of the Socialist Convergence, which purportedly had brainwashed those who had remained in the group. This accusation and its corollary, the loss of autonomy that SOMOS would suffer, provoked a violent polemic that lasted many months and that, at the level of personal relationships, ended up destroying or rocking several old friendships. To differentiate such similar groups, it was necessary to resort to what was deemed the worst possible accusation—the identification with groups of the traditional Left.

The rigid adherence to a homosexual identity on the part of its militants served to delineate the boundaries of the so-called homosexual movement, establishing a differentiation in relation to other liberation groups interested in altering the

traditional Brazilian way of dealing with sexuality. The community and the strong affective ties uniting the homosexual militants also had the effect of separating them from the rest of the population given to homosexual practices. This occurred despite the fact that the “conscious homosexual”—as the militant conceived himself—was little more than a politicized version of the *entendido* who is today one of the most common visitors to the ghetto. The latter, as I mentioned earlier, rejected the traditional hierarchical classification of homosexuals as “active” or “passive” (*bofes* or *bichas*), favoring a more egalitarian concept.

Homosexuals who insisted on the old stereotype of the *bicha* were sometimes criticized for their way of speaking, their extravagant clothes, their “sole preoccupation with sex,” and their “passive” sexual behavior, although they could also be admired for facing society’s prejudice head on. But among the *entendidos*, as well as among a large part of the founding members of SOMOS, the notion prevailed that, apart from their sexual preference, homosexuals did not differ from the other people who surrounded them. The practice of “passing,” or the concealment of one’s homosexuality, was common at work, in family relationships, or with less intimate acquaintances. Nevertheless, the need to adopt a strategy of passing in itself became a disagreeable burden that, in certain cases, led individuals not only to conceal their sexual preferences but to simulate a heterosexual life, inventing girl- or boyfriends and fiancé(e)s. Many in SOMOS felt that this was a dishonest strategy. Even among those who adopted passing as a frequent strategy, it was generally preferred to let others presume a nonexplicit heterosexuality than to lie directly about false heterosexual experiences.

In addition to passing, other strategies are available to help individuals deal with characteristics that make them stigmatizable. One of the most effective, in many cases, is voluntary revelation, frequently perceived as a more honest and more dignified approach. Although the element of choice is not always present (in some cases, dissimulation is impossible), this is the basis of many minority movements. In the case of homosexuals, this led to a curious ambivalence in the attitude toward those who were very blatant. Sometimes, they were criticized for “being too exaggerated,” for “only being concerned with sex,” or for “reproducing sexual roles,” and so on; in other cases, they were praised for their “courage” and for “assuming” their homosexuality.

For a great number of people who identify themselves as homosexuals, the possibility of passing as heterosexual is a reality and may be a constant practice. This brings more difficulties for the organization of a homosexual community. In such circumstances, one might expect considerable emphasis to be placed on coming out or, better, that the homosexual identity be held as the main truth about the individual, which may be a general tendency of our culture, as pointed out by Michel Foucault. According to him, the question of sex became, from the eighteenth century on, the basis for the constitution of knowledge of the subject and the source of its “truth” (Foucault 1979: 68).

For that same reason, in addition to the concept of homosexuality as an option, there was still the predominant notion that the homosexual identity was anchored in some immutable “essence” that was of congenital origin or acquired very early in life. That view, which was theoretically elaborated in the nineteenth century,

became more and more widespread; eventually, it constituted a type of “common sense,” at least among the more cultured levels of Brazilian society, including the middle-class homosexual inhabitants of large metropolises.

In *Lampião* articles, an ambiguity clearly appeared regarding the nature of homosexuality. At one moment, *Lampião* defended its legitimacy, claiming full rights of citizenship for homosexuals; at another, it praised the challenging aspects of its marginality. To emphasize the virtue of this challenge, it became important to highlight its conscious aspect, thus promoting the rejection of the notion that individuals are in some way preprogrammed with regard to their sexual orientation. This, together with the consciousness of the problems already caused by medical determinism that presented homosexuality as pathological, also engendered a refusal to speculate on the supposed etiology of homosexuality. The individualism of homosexuals and their supposed autonomy in the face of great social pressure were considered their greatest gifts, making them “undigestible” to the system. Many articles advocated a sharpening of the differences between individuals and instituted normality in order to “turn the tables” and “invent Utopia,” that is, to make a “revolution for pleasure.”

Thus, on the one hand, the construction of a collective homosexual identity was made difficult by the emphasis on the irreducible individuality of each person. But, on the other hand, to emphasize that the homosexual was already endowed with a predefined sexual preference was important in establishing a field in which a collective identity could be constructed.

As a corollary to his or her social marginality, the homosexual was idealized as eminently antiauthoritarian. This view of the essentially democratic nature of homosexuality had been manifest in the first document produced by the São Paulo group in 1978—its letter of protest against the way in which the press portrayed homosexuals. Homosexuality, according to this document, threatened the power retained by certain groups in society by challenging “the ideology where one being (the male) dominates another (the female) for a sole end (reproduction).” One can see here, in exemplary form, the political elaboration of the emerging egalitarian vision of homosexuality, wherein the old hierarchical model of relationships based on the different expectations of the roles attributed to the “active” and “passive” partner was rejected once and for all. The group contributed to the construction of a new homosexual identity and, through its activism and access to the media, helped legitimize it as “politically correct” and to broadcast it throughout society.

Uniting with feminists in their rejection of the inadequacies of Marxist theory to account for sexual questions, homosexual militants, although they still knew little of the details of feminist theory, adopted some of the feminists’ antihierarchical organizational methods and certain concepts, such as machismo and patriarchy. Nevertheless, the most marked feature of the Brazilian homosexual movement’s philosophical posture perhaps may be considered an exacerbated individualism.

As a result, within SOMOS, the rejection of any hierarchical or more restrictive organizational structure was considered essential to preserve the individuality of its members. This was reflected in the emphasis given to linking politics and

pleasure and the tendency to reject any type of "taskism" that justified disagreeable jobs in the name of the common good. During the crisis that led to the schism of SOMOS, one of the most bruising accusations that could be made against the group was to say its meetings were becoming boring.

Another aspect of that hedonistic individualism of homosexuals is the valorization of their permanent sexual availability. This characteristic, found especially among male homosexuals but also present among lesbians, was reflected in the proclamations of *Lampião* and in the casual attitude with which sexual relationships were viewed within SOMOS. Questioning all types of authoritarianism or reproduction of roles, members rejected monogamy, and casual sex and one-night stands were encouraged because they were thought to exclude feelings of possessiveness or jealousy. This view of sex was, in fact, more accentuated within the group than in the ghetto, where fidelity was a requirement in many relationships that purported to be stable. These, though, were relatively few, and the organized homosexuals, as well as the nonorganized ones, generally understood the possibility of promiscuity to be one of the important aspects of sexual liberty. In that regard, homosexual men do not appear to be very different from heterosexuals in Brazil. Lesbians, on the other hand, frequently value monogamy more, but even so, those who participated in the homosexual movement also began to develop a less committed sexual behavior. This frequently led to their being considered "easy" by other lesbians who were not organized.

In fact, though this individualism was quite widespread in the homosexual population, SOMOS's attempt to give it political meaning and to accommodate it to the precepts of an organized militancy and a community ideal was incomprehensible to the vast majority of those who frequented the ghetto. The latter exhibited considerable distrust of any political activity and of the posture of superiority sometimes adopted by the militants. Although homosexual activists never formally declared themselves the vanguard of homosexuals, such a position was, nevertheless, frequently assumed in informal conversations. There were many complaints of alienated bichas who did not appreciate the efforts of the militants. A certain disdain for the nonorganized homosexuals also seeped into their designation as such and into their classification as being "ghettoized" or "closeted."

Though originally conceived as evidence of progress in sexual relations, the homosexual egalitarian identity itself (also called "gay" or "entendido" identity) began to be questioned in the second half of the eighties. Some alleged, for example, that this new identity would contribute to a new standardization and territorialization of deviant sexualities. As defenders of this identity, homosexual militants were now seen to be playing a conservative role. However, a more attentive study of the development of that new gay identity reveals that it is not static but rather is endowed with historicity and changes.

A study of the entendidos of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1970s showed that those men still felt a need to assert their masculinity in a society that, by pushing homosexuals underground, kept itself almost entirely ignorant about them and was content to equate homosexuality with the desire to play the role appropriate to the opposite gender (Guimarães 1977). Some years later, as homosexuality

became one of the main themes diffused by mass media, the public was familiarized with the tangle of the gay world. The *entendidos* of today feel free of the need to constantly reaffirm their masculinity and, on certain occasions, may give themselves the luxury of participating with the other "bofes," "bichas," "homosexual militants," "gays," "real men," "real women," *sapatonas* ("butches"), and so on in the "carnivalization" of gender roles so popular among Brazilians.

Even in the early days, when SOMOS was still intent on educating the public, spreading a "normal" image of homosexuals, there was much toying with the question of gender roles, and camping was constantly resorted to, both in the promotion of group solidarity and as political defiance. In fact, such was the ridicularization of the traditional rigidity of gender roles (reflected, for example, in the use of the term *bicha* with grammatical agreement in the feminine, as a form of self-designation by the men of the group) that it even led newly recruited militants to criticize what they considered a stereotypical representation of homosexuality. However, after attending meetings for some weeks and taking part in discussions of sexuality, those same individuals often adopted more tolerant attitudes toward the immense spectrum of possible variations in the homosexual role. This differentiated new militants from others who frequented the ghetto, where far more traditional patterns of behavior prevailed—in effeminate behavior as much as in circumspection and dignity.

SOMOS militants formed a fairly sui generis group, different from the frequenters of the ghetto and distinct from other political militants. Their libertarian manner of organizing also served to differentiate them from the other homosexuals with militant experiences in more traditional opposition groups. These individuals could not understand the anarchy of the SOMOS meetings, the disrespect with which concepts that were nearly sacred to the Left (such as class struggle) were treated, and the total lack of precision with respect to the objectives of the group and the ways in which these might be achieved. This is how the differences were established, for example, between members of SOMOS and the Gay Faction of the Socialist Convergence.

A large number of ghetto frequenters, accustomed to considering the opening of new commercial establishments to cater to the homosexual public as "victories for the cause," did not understand the reservations SOMOS militants had against the integration of homosexuals into consumer society. The militants perceived the homosexual question as a fuse for a more encompassing social revolution, but the nonorganized tended to think of it more in terms of civil rights to be conquered within the existing social structure.

Many studies of the new urban social movements have pointed out that though these movements declare the elimination of certain deprivations as their principal objective, they end up considering the simple maintenance of the group to be their main aim. In feminist and homosexual groups, for example, long meetings took place without preestablished goals and ended without arriving at any decision. And in many cases, "political" meetings acquired a purely affective and social function. Similarly, the interruption of theoretical discussions for deliberations on the private lives of the participants was frequent.

Another constant characteristic was the emphasis on the importance of the private aspects of the lives of the militants, for whom participation in these

movements was perceived to be a form of personal enrichment or achievement, in contrast with the "massification" that occurred in the external world. It is common to hear reports about this type of participation in terms that recall the effects of religious conversions. In the case of groups concerned with homosexual militancy, which are greatly focused on the sexual and affective problems of their members, this dimension acquires an even greater importance. Many of their members declared that they were searching for a group with the main intention of finding new friends and maybe even a lover. As a result, despite its initial success, it was inevitable that SOMOS should lose much of its attraction, once the news got around of its internal quarrels and of the alleged takeover by the Socialist Convergence.

Still another frequently mentioned aspect of new social movements is that, through the definition of new needs, they make claims for new rights. SOMOS promoted the idea that everyone had the right to pleasure and to sexual gratification, regardless of whether the object of his or her desire was a member of the opposite sex. Thus, SOMOS demanded that the state recognize the Gay Group of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro's Pink Triangle Group as openly homosexual legal entities. The recognition of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual expression and the repeal of its classification as a "sexual deviation and disturbance" in the code of diseases of the state health department were also achieved. Even the portrayal of homosexuality in the press could change if the media's code of ethics were followed. In 1986, thanks to the initiative of SOMOS militants, that code was changed to include among the acts prohibited to journalists "that of being party to the practice of persecution or discrimination for reasons of a social, political, religious, or racial nature, sex or sexual orientation."

Less successful, yet reflecting a change of attitudes on the part of important segments of the population, was the ephemeral victory achieved by the Rio group Pink Triangle and its tireless vice president. Thanks to his efforts and persistence, in the first project of the new Brazilian constitution, elaborated by the Systematization Commission in July of 1987, sexual orientation was listed among the unacceptable reasons for prejudicial treatment. Nevertheless, in the constitution's final version, the term was again removed. Such a provision was, however, included in the municipal constitution of Salvador, Bahia, São Paulo, and two other cities, giving a legal basis for the actions of the homosexual militants of those urban centers.

It is sometimes said that though movements such as Christian base communities or residents' associations can exert influence due to their sheer numbers, others with a smaller number of supporters, like feminists (and homosexuals can also be included here), influence political and social life through elite resources, such as political parties, the media, and cultural institutions (Viola and Mainwaring 1987: 140). Today, the discussion of homosexuality is generalized in Brazil, based on a more informed and less prejudicial comprehension. But at a certain moment, the diffusion of new attitudes and practices was immensely facilitated by the existence of individuals or organizations prepared to express them. Without these interlocutors who served as catalysts for the new tendencies, the press, for example, would have had greater difficulty in dealing with the homosexual question in a

positive way. Similarly, at the universities, where the subject has been attracting much interest, the new social approach was strongly legitimized by the inclusion of the homosexual struggle under the topic of urban social movements and by the numerous lectures, debates, and events promoted by homosexual intellectuals and artists.

The effectiveness of homosexual groups is undeniable in several ways. Perhaps the principal one has been the construction of friendship networks uniting (and also promoting) a new type of homosexual, who is not dominated by feelings of guilt and who does not consider him- or herself ill or abnormal. Even after the openly militant activities ceased, those networks survived, and, in numerous cases, they have been crucial to the lives of many of their participants, influencing their choices of dwelling, work, leisure activities, and political options.

Currently, with the tragic outbreak of AIDS that has principally affected homosexuals, the importance of those networks and of the adoption of a homosexual identity has been underlined; both are essential for a better administration of the crisis.

In 1983, when AIDS began to manifest itself in Brazil and especially in São Paulo, some of the old militants met again to debate measures to be taken to combat the syndrome, which was then still considered "a gay plague." They contacted medical authorities of the recently installed democratic state administration. This mobilization revealed that: (1) increasingly sharp contours of a gay identity were being outlined among the sectors of the population involved in homosexual practices in São Paulo and (2) although homosexuals were willing to review their sexual habits, they refused to give up some of the conquests of the recent years, such as greater tolerance on the part of society and the space in which to live a more open and accepted sexuality (Silva 1986).

Thanks to these contacts, the first official program for the prevention and treatment of AIDS in the country was then established. It was directed by doctors who were generally committed to a respectful position and sympathetic to the population with homosexual practices. This greater acceptance was also facilitated by the past actions of the militants, who had made homosexuality more respectable and legitimate and thereby enabled political, medical, or academic authorities to declare their support without many constraints.

In an underdeveloped society like Brazil's, public health services are inevitably precarious, and thus the performance of government organizations becomes very important in supporting and supervising them. In recent years, there has been an upsurge of new groups—largely formed by homosexuals (and frequently the old militants of the gay movement)—that propose to unite family, friends, and AIDS victims, irrespective of their sexual orientation. In addition to the fact that they were structured on the friendship networks established during the days of militancy, these groups have frequently cited episodes of that militancy as instructive experiences or points of reference, even if only experiences to be avoided.

In sum, one can say that, despite the fact that it drew on a minority segment of the population whose aspirations and way of life have been severely stigmatized in almost all sectors of society, SOMOS was very similar in organization and development to numerous other social movement groups focused on promoting

political change. Thus, like them, SOMOS also exhibited important deficiencies: a reduced number of militants and a general unpreparedness for political action, especially at a broader level, that was less related to its specific demands. The dictatorship favored a simplistic Manichaeism, where political forces could be divided between the existing regime and the opposition, but the gradual installation of a more pluralistic order brought new difficulties for all these movements. The reorganization of the party system was quite divisive, generating, for example, schisms at inter- and intragroup levels (see Cardoso, Chapter 16). The state itself has been refining its strategy vis-à-vis civil society, thus increasing its power to co-opt sectors that form the basis of these movements. Certainly, such movements are incapable of transforming Brazil into a democratic society by themselves, but their importance in the cultural realm should not be belittled, especially in promoting the renewal of the values at the base of their ideologies, discourses, and political practices.

For its part, SOMOS, like other manifestations of the Brazilian homosexual movement, encountered its greatest difficulties and challenges precisely because of its aspiration to build a more egalitarian society. The homosexual movement hoped to expand the limits of tolerance for diversity, and it examined generally accepted notions of sexuality and gender roles. Emphasizing the playful and the nonconformist, the movement questioned the “naturalness” of social relationships and celebrated the sovereignty of the individual, promoting libertarianism explicitly in its demands as well as implicitly in its ideals of nonhierarchical organization.