

“Con discriminación y represión no hay democracia”:

The Lesbian and Gay Movement in Argentina

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Introduction

In the afternoon of August 27, 1996, about twenty Argentinean lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered activists stormed into the Constituent Assembly (*Convención Estatuylente*) of Buenos Aires. They carried blown-up photos of Carlos Jáuregui, the country's most prominent and respected gay activist, who had died of AIDS one week earlier. Followed by members of the press and television crews, the activists tracked down the members of the commission responsible for writing the new municipal charter and shamed each one of them into signing a statement of support for the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, alongside gender, age, ethnicity, religion and political ideology. A few days later, on August 30, the Constituent Assembly unanimously approved the non-discrimination clause and Buenos Aires became the first city in Spanish-speaking Latin America to protect nonheterosexuals from being discriminated against on that basis.¹

This narrative demonstrates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activism² not only exists in Argentina, but sometimes is quite prominent and yields tangible political results. The main purpose of this paper is to explain the emergence and expansion of the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement as well as its timing. My central argument is that Argentinean lesbian and gay activism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s more as part of a global cycle of protest than because of changes in domestic conditions. New domestic constraints, however, led to its rapid dissolution in the mid-1970s. During the 1980s, lesbian and gay activists capitalized on certain political opportunities—principally the return to democracy, the human rights discourse and some international support—to build a movement. As such, the “political opportunity structures”

This paper is based on twenty-odd in-depth interviews that I held in Buenos Aires in May/June 1996 and February 1997, with activists belonging to a dozen lesbian, gay and transgender organizations. During my visits, I attended numerous planning meetings, demonstrations, fundraisers and social events. I also interviewed a few members of human rights and AIDS organizations that undertake relevant activities. The *Biblioteca Gay-Lésbica* and *Escrita en el Cuerpo* as well as some individual activists provided a wealth of written and visual information that is not available outside Argentina.

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¹ Alejandra Sardá, “La invasión de la otra ciudadanía” (*Escrita en el Cuerpo*, servicio electrónico de noticias, August 28, 1996) and “Prohibido discriminar en Buenos Aires” (August 31, 1996).

² As the title of this paper indicates, I will focus primarily on lesbian and gay activism; however, I will also sometimes include transgendered people. I use “transgender” to denote individuals that in Argentina are called *travestis* and *transexuales*. Here, terminology gets confusing because what Argentineans refer to as a *travesti* is not a transvestite, cross-dresser or drag queen (known there as *transformista*), but what is often called in North America a “pre-op” transsexual. For them, *transexual* refers solely to someone having undergone genital reassignment surgery. Bisexuality is only beginning to be addressed in the movement. I avoid using the term “queer”, now *en vogue* in North American scholarship, because it is hardly used in Argentina and in fact deliberately resisted for its erasure of difference among a diverse community of nonheterosexuals.

approach to social movements provides many of the pieces of the puzzle; however, it fails to explain or even take into account a crucial factor: identity formation. Indeed, the diffusion of lesbian and gay identity is a prerequisite to activism, albeit insufficient in itself to create a movement. Furthermore, opportunities are not enough to explain actions, nor the splintering of the movement into many small and sometimes antagonistic groups. Though one cannot make definitive statements from a single case study, this paper suggests that social movement theory should make greater efforts not to accept identity as given, especially when sexuality is concerned, and to consider both its origins and consequences. This will provide a richer analysis, as well as a greater indication of the future of the movement.

Lesbian and gay activism, especially in developing countries, is an understudied area of academia. Of the major volumes on social movements in Latin America, only one with which I am familiar considers mobilization around the issue of sexual orientation.³ Even the most recent attempts at synthesizing contemporary social movement theory fail to address lesbian and gay movements in any significant way.⁴ In addition, major works on “social theory” by the likes of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens make no mention of sexuality. As Michael Warner argues, “Perhaps more surprising is the absence of a more than fleeting consideration of sexuality in Laclau and Mouffe, in Bourdieu...”⁵ It is not for a lack of organizing: Formal lesbian and gay organizations have existed in the United States since the 1950s and have become prominent in North America and Western Europe over the last 25 years. In Latin America, “Every... country except Panama and Paraguay”, according to one author, “now has an organized gay-lesbian movement, many of them active since the mid-1980s”.⁶ To my knowledge, no academic study of the lesbian and gay movement in Argentina has ever been published.

I will begin by providing a historical background on lesbian and gay activism in Argentina, both factual and analytical, and describe the movement as it is organized today. I will then use the “political opportunity structures” approach to explain the emergence of the movement. I will subsequently discuss the centrality of identity in a more nuanced understanding of the origins, current structures and strategies of the movement. Finally, I will conclude on the changing nature of lesbian and gay activism in Argentina and how best to understand it, as well as speculate on its future.

³ Edward MacRae, “Homosexual Identities in Transitional Brazilian politics” in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Álvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy and Democracy* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1992).

⁴ See Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Only one chapter—Hanspeter Kriesi’s “The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context”—discusses the existence of a gay “collective identity”, and yet merely treats it as an unproblematized “subcultural movement” not unlike many others (p. 158).

⁵ Michael Warner, “Introduction”, in *idem*, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. ix.

⁶ Peter Drucker, “‘In the Tropics There Is No Sin’: Sexuality and Gay-Lesbian Movements in the Third World”, *New Left Review*, no. 218 (July/August 1996), p. 92.

Historical background and current situation

Although informal gay and lesbian groups previously existed, the first official gay organization in Argentina (and, in fact, in all of Latin America), the *Grupo Nuestro Mundo*, was founded in November 1969, during the military dictatorship headed by General Juan Carlos Onganía. In 1971, it joined with a few other groups to form the radical *Frente de Liberación Homosexual* (FLH), subsequently bringing in a total of ten constituent groups, including left-wing university students, anarchists and religious groups—most of whose members were men. Even after the 1973 democratic elections and the return to power of Juan Domingo Perón, the FLH remained an underground organization, allying itself closely with the struggles of workers and feminists, both nationally and internationally. Following Perón's death in 1974 and during his wife Isabel's presidency, right-wing paramilitary activities rose rapidly, explicitly targeting homosexuals. The FLH's membership rapidly dropped from one hundred to a mere dozen. After the March 1976 military coup, many of its members were tortured, murdered or went into hiding or exile, and the FLH dissolved in June.⁷

During the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, as the brutal dictatorship benignly called itself, formal lesbian and gay activism ceased to exist. In 1982, a few groups began to form once again and, at the end of the year, they formed a rather loose coordination committee (*Coordinadora de Grupos Gays*). Between January 1982 and November 1983, as the dictatorship was on its last leg, a new wave of murders claimed the lives of at least 18 gay men in Buenos Aires, including a former member of the FLH. Only two of them were solved. In June 1982, a paramilitary group calling itself the *Comando Cóndor* issued a statement that it intended to “finish off” homosexuals. One member of the commission later appointed to investigate disappearances (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, CONADEP) estimates that at least 400 lesbians and gay men had been disappeared, though no mention of this is made in the official report, *Nunca Más*.⁸

With the collapse of the military regime and the return to democracy in 1983, the country witnessed a rapid resurgence of lesbian and gay life. Under a new feeling of freedom, numerous bars and clubs opened, though it was not the end of repression that sparked the renewal of activism: In March 1984, the police raided *Balvanera*, a gay club, and detained some 200 people. The owners received a series of threats and left the country. The repression, far from disappearing under democratization, launched the lesbian and gay movement, whose activists were no doubt inspired by (a) the mass demonstrations towards the end of the dictatorship and (b) a new *sed de conocer* that followed the discreditation of the Church, the military, the state and

⁷ It is not clear if FLH members were persecuted for being members of the organization, for simply being gay or lesbian, for being left-wing activists, or a combination thereof. For more information on the FLH, see Néstor Perlongher, “Una historia del FLH” in Zelmara Acevedo, *Homosexualidad: Hacia la Destrucción de los Mitos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sur, 1985); and James N. Green, “Feathers and Fists: A Comparative Analysis of the Argentine and Brazilian Gay Rights Movements of the 1970s”, paper presented at the XVIIth International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, March 10, 1994. An extract of the FLH's document “Sex and Revolution” is available in English (trans. Sam Larson) in Stephan Likosky, ed., *Coming Out: An Anthology of International Gay and Lesbian Writing* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), pp. 183-90.

⁸ Gays por los Derechos Civiles, “Violaciones de Derechos Humanos y Civiles en la República Argentina basadas en la orientación sexual de las personas y de las personas viviendo con VIH/SIDA”, third edition, December 1995, pp. 3 and 4.

traditional values.⁹ The following month, 150 activists met in the gay bar *Contramano* and founded the *Comunidad Homosexual Argentina* (CHA). The CHA brought together gay men and lesbians of diverse political beliefs, fourteen of whom were prepared to be publicly identified.¹⁰ Throughout the rest of the 1980s, the CHA remained by far the most important group, opening chapters in several cities, though it went into decline in the 1990s and “temporarily” suspended its activities at the end of 1996.

The early 1990s were marked by a new proliferation of groups, both mixed/gay-dominated and lesbian. A feminist lesbian group, *Las Lunas y las Otras*, first met in July 1990. In 1991, the CHA was granted legal status (*personería jurídica*) after a long struggle, which brought homosexuality to public attention and facilitated the formation of new groups. The CHA then had an identity crisis over what its concrete goals and strategy should be. There was much in-fighting, both personal and ideological, and many activists left and formed their own (gay/mixed) groups, such as the *Sociedad de Integración Gay-Lésbica Argentina* (SIGLA) and the *Grupo de Investigación en Sexualidad e Interacción Social* (Grupo ISIS) in 1992. *Gays y Lesbianas por los Derechos Civiles* (Gays DC) was founded in October 1991, also by former members of the CHA. In September 1991, Ilse Fuskova appeared on national television as an out lesbian, inspiring a new wave of visibility and activism among lesbians, including the founding of the group *Convocatoria Lesbiana*. The first transgender group, *Transexuales por el Derecho a la Vida y la Identidad* (TRANSDEVI) was founded and held its first demonstration in May 1991, followed by several other associations. The first Lesbian and Gay Pride March took place in July 1992.

Though there has been a clear proliferation of organizations since the early 1990s, the twenty-odd groups are all quite limited in size, implying that the movement has not become mass-based. On the contrary, each group has a very small core leadership (whether official or *de facto*) and some peripheral activists that do volunteer work and often participate in demonstrations without necessarily debating or setting policy. Well-publicized, large-scale demonstrations attract participants from a wider pool. Notably, the annual Pride marches attract over one thousand lesbians and gay men who are not otherwise involved in the movement, at least not formally. Nonetheless, very little is done to attract “new recruits”. Though the movement’s achievements are impressive on a number of levels, it remains true that only a very small percentage of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people are interested or willing to participate. Though the Pride demonstrations are possibly the largest in Latin America, the movement is still, as one activist pointed out, a long way from filling the Plaza de Mayo with supporters—the litmus test of Argentinean social movements since Perón.¹¹

Nearly all the mixed/gay male dominated groups split off from the CHA or, like Gays DC, were founded by former CHA members a few years after leaving the organization. Only the youngest of gay activists did not start off in the CHA. Many lesbians began their activism with the CHA and left, or at least had some contact with that organization. The lesbians groups, though, historically owe much to the feminist movement. A couple of lesbian separatist groups have virtually no contact with other groups in the movement and do not accept new members.

⁹ Interview, Buenos Aires, May 23, 1996.

¹⁰ Carlos Luis Jáuregui, *La Homosexualidad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tarso, 1987), p. 202.

¹¹ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 3, 1996.

Though certain alliances were formed and dissolved over the years among like-minded groups (for example, the now defunct *Frente Lesbiana*), it was only in 1995 that members of the various groups (mixed/male-dominated and female) began to meet regularly and work together on short-term projects. As a first activity, they decided to organize a national gathering of gay, lesbian, transvestite and transsexual (GLTT) organizations, which was held in Rosario in March 1996, slated to become an annual event. (It was at that point that transgendered people were accepted into the lesbian and gay movement, at least as close allies). This meeting has been variously described as “the founding moment of our movement, an Argentinean Stonewall” and “a waste of time, the same old people saying the same old things, only in a different place”.¹² Their second major task was to organize the fifth annual GLTT Pride march (under its expanded title to include the transgendered), held on June 28, 1996, which—with approximately 1500 participants—was larger than the previous four. The third was the previously mentioned campaign to include a clause in the new Buenos Aires municipal charter that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Political opportunities and the emergence of the movement

Though certain social-historical changes on a more structural level had earlier provided the conditions for organization around sexual identity to emerge, it was the collapse of arch-conservative *Proceso* in 1983 that provided an opening for the emergence of a lesbian and gay movement. (Recall that lesbian and gay activism—basically the FLH—originally appeared while Argentina was still under military rule.) Redemocratization provided a new space and vocabulary for those seeking lesbian and gay rights.

Argentinean lesbians and gay men, like those in almost all other countries, have a difficult relationship with the state, especially the police, when it comes to their sexuality. The police continually raid bars and clubs, and use various regulations to detain lesbians, gay men and transgendered people without charging them. Transvestites and transsexuals suffer disproportionately from police harassment. For example, Gays DC’s legal service intervened in 331 cases of arbitrary arrest of transgendered people from January to November 1995, and they estimate the actual number to be ten times higher.¹³ Many are verbally and physically abused while in custody. Some still disappear and are later found murdered, and the cases go uninvestigated.¹⁴

Only a handful of countries have non-discrimination laws, only one of which—post-*apartheid* South Africa—is in the developing world. Even in liberal democracies, lesbians and gay men often are not accorded the same rights as other collective groups. In the United States, for example, private consensual gay sex between adults is still outlawed in 19 states. Argentina

¹² *Ibid.* The comment about Stonewall alludes to the riot in New York City in 1969 that symbolically marks the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the United States.

¹³ Gays por los Derechos Civiles, *op. cit.*, Annex I.

¹⁴ For example, Mocha Celis, a 34 year old *travesti* prostitute whose life had been repeatedly threatened by policemen, was seen getting into a police car on August 18, 1996. Later that night, she was found bleeding on the street, having been shot twice in the penis. She was immediately hospitalized but died soon after. The police state they have found no leads. (Alejandra Sardá, “Travesti asesinada por la policía”, *Escrita en el Cuerpo*, servicio electrónico de noticias August 24, 1996.)

never legally forbade sodomitical acts, though lesbians and gay men are not treated equally before the law. Until November 1990, for example, the Province of Buenos Aires legally prohibited lesbians and gay men from voting, though the provision was not enforced. Except in matters under the jurisdiction of the city of Buenos Aires, it currently is perfectly legal to fire employees for being lesbian or gay, refuse them housing for that reason, or otherwise discriminate against them. However, even formal laws are no guarantee of legal protection: other reasons can be found for firing an employee, while the police can use other means to arrest an individual, including planting evidence.

So-called sexual minorities are not historically recognized by the Argentine state as legitimate collective actors and members of civil society. For years, the government refused to grant legal status to the CHA, thus impeding representation and fund-raising. The Supreme Court upheld this decision, citing as justifications the position of the Catholic Church, the protection of the family, and medical opinion.¹⁵

Political parties of the Left have sometimes supported lesbian and gay rights and placed openly lesbian and gay candidates on their lists, but not one has ever been elected. Much of the Left has refused to ally itself with gay politics, be it out of prejudice or fear of losing popular support. There is no Argentinean counterpart to the Brazilian *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, which works with a wide range of social movements, including the lesbian and gay one. In any case, Argentina is essentially a two-party system: the Radicals and *Justicialistas* (Peronists) alternately hold the reins of power, neither of which has demonstrated much sympathy for homosexual causes.

Pluralism clearly has its limits when it comes to interest representation regarding sexuality, among other issues. As Jean Cohen remarks, “civil society, with intermediary and autonomous associations so dear to the pluralists, and not the nightmare image of mass society, is the terrain on which the anathematized social movement appears!”¹⁶ Historically, even the radical Left feared being associated with lesbian and gay interests. For example, targeted by a right-wing poster campaign linking the Marxist ERP with homosexuality and drug addiction, the Peronist Left responded with the homophobic slogan, “No somos putos, no somos faloperos, somos soldados del FAR y Montoneros”.¹⁷

From the very beginning, the CHA’s strategy was to build bridges with other social movement on such issues as human rights, violence and AIDS.¹⁸ The effort to join with other people and groups who had suffered under military rule is made clear in the first paid advertisement to promote gay and lesbian rights, published by the CHA in the daily *El Clarín* on May 28, 1984, under the headline “CON DISCRIMINACION Y REPRESION NO HAY DEMOCRACIA” (see Annex). After citing the World Health Organization’s decision to remove homosexuality from its list of diseases, the ad states that “No existirá democracia verdadera si la sociedad permite la subsistencia de los sectores marginados y de los diversos métodos de represión aún vigentes.” It then refers to more than 1,500,000 homosexual citizens as “personas que... nos preocupamos por la realidad nacional y transitamos junto a Ud. los duros años de la

¹⁵ Eugene Robinson, “Argentina’s Gays Battle Attitudes”, *Washington Post*, December 12, 1991, pp. 43A and 46A. Also see Likosky, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Jean Cohen, “Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements”, *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 673.

¹⁷ Drucker, *op. cit.*, p. 94, and Jáuregui, *op. cit.*, pp. 199 and 200.

¹⁸ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 3, 1996.

dictadura”.¹⁹ The reader, who at that point was highly likely to be opposed to military rule, was thus invited to relate to gay men and lesbians and therefore support their right to be free of discrimination and repression under a democratic system, regardless of his or her own personal views on homosexuality.

The CHA deliberately used the human rights discourse, which had achieved much legitimacy in contributing to the collapse of the military dictatorship, to promote lesbian and gay rights and to create links with other human rights organizations. It chose as its motto: “El libre ejercicio de la sexualidad es un derecho humano”. Over the next three years, however, President Raúl Alfonsín’s government repeatedly caved in to military demands and the human rights discourse was severely discredited. As a consequence, in 1987, the CHA changed tactics almost overnight and decided to concentrate on AIDS. HIV/AIDS suddenly appeared as the main topic of their newsletter, *Vamos a Andar*, and the CHA launched its “Stop SIDA” program. It also concentrated much of its energy on obtaining legal status, to the detriment of actual activism.

The international arena also provide key models and support for activism in Argentina. From the days of the FLH to the present, Argentinean lesbian and gay publications reflect a great awareness of the lives of gay men and lesbians all over the world, especially in the US and Western Europe, their activism, political struggles and victories, and cultural activities. Argentineans have adopted as their own the international symbols and representations, reclaimed historical figures, and so forth, all of which reinforce the diffusion of a global, essentialized identity. Of course, the significance of being gay or lesbian is not identical in different contexts, just as culture and practices differ from place to place. But international opportunity structures also contributed to the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement. For example, transnational linkages were very important in the CHA’s efforts to win its *personería jurídica*, obtained through a coordinated international campaign to raise the issue while President Carlos Menem was on an official visit to the US in November 1991.²⁰ Gay groups’ AIDS programs have received funding from foreign organizations ranging from the Norwegian Red Cross to the American Foundation for AIDS Research, however funding virtually dried up around 1994 and there are currently no AIDS-awareness campaigns or safer-sex outreach program in Argentina.²¹

Several long-time Argentinean activists cite inspiration from their brothers and sisters abroad in their struggle, sometimes through extended first-hand contact. Ilse Fuskova, who—as mentioned above—was among the first nationally out lesbians, says that she would never have found the courage had she not spent several years working with lesbians in Germany and San Francisco. The idea of lesbian and gay archives also was foreign-derived.²² International connections, now often via the Internet, and regional and world-wide gatherings (such as the Beijing Women’s Conference, periodic Latin American Feminist Meetings or those sponsored by the International Lesbian and Gay Association) play an important part in diffusing lesbian and gay

¹⁹ The advertisement is reproduced in Jáuregui, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

²⁰ Menem was essentially shamed into issuing a decree recognizing the CHA. Among the groups that participated were the International Lesbian and Gay Association, the (US) National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. See Robert Julian, “A Decisive Time for Argentina Gays”, *The Advocate*, December 17, 1991, pp. 50 and 51. For more information on the role of the transnational assistance and local actors in Argentina, read Alison Brysk, “From Above and Below: Social Movements, the International System, and Human Rights in Argentina”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (October 1993).

²¹ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 4, 1996.

²² Interviews, Buenos Aires, May 23 and June 3, 1996.

culture and representations and creating a sense of community. Thus both the international diffusion of lesbian and gay identity and the models of activism elsewhere contributed to the emergence and expansion of activism in Argentina, above and beyond “political opportunities” provided by concrete international assistance.

Identity and politics

Much of the literature on social movements emphasizes “resource mobilization” and the achievement of policy results. They analyze collective action “in terms of the logic of strategic interaction and cost benefit analysis”, using “such ‘objective’ variables as organization, interests, resources, opportunities and strategies”²³. Indeed, the mechanics and outcomes of protest movements are important, and certainly an improvement over earlier grievance-based conceptions of social movements. More broadly speaking, the “political opportunity structures” approach provides a valuable model for using opportunities and constraints that the movement must face to better understand the dynamics of the case. For Argentina, this has meant relating the lesbians and gay movement to the democratization, the human rights discourse that emerged in the early 1980s and international support. Yet when studying the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement, these are analytically insufficient. Such an emphasis would ignore motivation, differing understandings, beliefs, priorities, visions, and dynamic and sometimes contradictory relationships between individuals and groups, so much of which hinges on identity. It would be to think, in the words of Alain Touraine, “as if actors were defined by their goals and not by social relationships—and especially power relationships—in which they are involved”.²⁴

Since “these ‘political opportunities’ are but a necessary prerequisite to action”, the current consensus in comparative social movements is to also consider the “framing process”, defined as “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action”.²⁵ In practice, however, this is too often reduced to prevailing culture and ideas/ideology, without considering the nature of identity.²⁶ While trying not to “reproduce the ideological self-understanding of actors or slip into a social-psychological analysis of struggle” that would characterize a “pure identity-oriented analysis of social movements”,²⁷ I will now discuss identity-formation and its relationship with lesbian and gay politics in Argentina.

Same-sex eroticism does not necessarily create a homosexual identity in societies any more than it does in individuals. Just as many people who engage in it do not inevitably see or define themselves as any different from anyone else, likewise societies do not naturally have “homosexuals”. Homosexuality as we understand it today was invented, or historically emerged, in Argentina, just as it did elsewhere, over the past 120 years or less. Though homosexual acts (same-sex eroticism) have existed throughout history and across cultures, it is only over the last century that they have been identified with a certain type of person. Whereas sodomy was a

²³ Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 674 and 675.

²⁴ Alain Touraine, “An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements”, *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 769.

²⁵ McAdam *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 and 8.

²⁶ See, for example, Mayer N. Wald, “Culture, ideology, and strategic framing” in *ibid.*, pp. 261-274.

²⁷ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 695.

transgression everyone was theoretically capable of committing (like, say, theft), sexual orientation is a relatively new way of defining people. The medical discourse contributed much to this epistemological transition—see the published works of Michel Foucault²⁸ in general and, as applied to Argentina, Jorge Salessi²⁹.

Rapidly expanding capitalism and urbanization also contributed to the invention of homosexuality. Notably, the freeing of labor from the household through wages allowed individuals, especially men, to live in cities where they could separate their public (work) lives from their private (sexual) lives, a division that was next to impossible in a preindustrial rural locale. Freed from the family unit, a person could thus hide his or her sexuality at work and then “be gay” in his or her free time. One’s circle of friends could then be determined less by kinship and geographical proximity than by common sexual orientation. Urban spatial and commercial factors are also important. Places to meet other homosexuals—usually bars but also (for gay men) public “cruising” areas—presented the industrial-age homosexual with new possibilities for congregation and group identification. For many, so-called public spaces sometimes afforded more privacy than their places of abode: Argentineans usually lived with extended families and day-laborers, especially immigrants, often stayed in boarding houses. As women entered the work force, a similar process of separation of work and leisure occurred, also allowing them to organize their personal lives around their sexuality.³⁰

Simultaneously, there was a gradual change in the sexual categories and their interpretations. In the past, sexuality was defined by gender role, so that only the *pasivo* man in anal intercourse (the insertee) or “active” woman was marked by deviance, while the *activo* male (the insertor) and “passive” woman retained their status of normal.³¹ Increasingly, sexuality depended on the (anatomical) sex of the object of one’s desire and thus anyone having intercourse with a member of the same sex is defined as a homosexual, regardless of gendered roles. In New York City, for example, this shift reportedly took place around the 1930s for middle-class white men and later among the working classes and ethnic minorities.³² In Argentina, this new sexual “regime” arguably became dominant around the 1970s, though it is not completely hegemonic today, and has increased the number of individuals who may identify as gay or lesbian.

Though they may explain the rise of a relatively widespread lesbian and gay identity, neither the industrialization argument nor the new organization of sexuality are sufficient to cause

²⁸ Michel Foucault’s eloquent description of this transition is often cited: “As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the judicial subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.... Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 43.

²⁹ Notably, Jorge Salessi, *Médicos Maleantes y Maricas* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterro, 1995).

³⁰ See John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 467-76.

³¹ For more information on differing sexual models among Latin Americans and Latinos, see Tomás Almaguer, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior” in Abelove *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-73, and Stephen O. Murray, *Latin American Male Homosexualities* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

³² George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), pp. 13, 48 and 66.

the emergence of a movement. If rapid industrialization/urbanization occurred in Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s, why did lesbian and gay activism arise only around 1970 and then emerge more definitively as a movement after 1984? Clearly other factors are more important.

I surmise that the timing of the emergence of the founding of the FLH and its member groups owes much to events all over the world that marked a high point in an international protest cycle, including the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, mass student demonstrations in France and Mexico in 1968, opposition in the United States to the Vietnam War, and the growing women's liberation movement, as well as left-wing activism across Latin American and in Europe. Argentina was especially open to responding to these events, since its inhabitants have long looked abroad, especially to Europe and the United States, for a cultural model, arguably more than in any other Latin American country. I thus share Doug McAdam's "suspicion that spin-off movements owe less to expanding political opportunities than to complex diffusion processes by which the ideational, tactical, and organizational lessons of the early risers are made available to subsequent challengers",³³ at least in the case of the FLH in the early 1970s.

In the early 1970s, a FLH member group adopted the controversial slogan "No hay que liberar al homosexual, hay que liberar lo homosexual de cada persona", echoing a call by the New York-based Gay Liberation Front to "liberate the homosexual in everyone". This implied that gay people were essentially no different from heterosexuals; they had merely opened themselves up to a potential that all people have. This does not mean that they wanted everyone to be gay; quite the contrary, they wanted to eliminate categories of people based on sexual orientation.

A fundamental contradiction arises from organizing around identity; it actually reinforces the categories and the boundaries between them:

Of course, it is usually the dominant group that erects social, political, economic and cultural boundaries to accentuate the difference between itself and minority populations. Paradoxically, however, for groups organizing to pursue collective ends, the process of asserting "who we are" often involves a kind of reverse affirmation of the characteristics attributed to it by the larger society. Boundary markers are, therefore, central to the formation of collective identity because they promote a heightened awareness of a group's commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group.³⁴

In their study of lesbian feminist mobilization in the United States, Taylor and Whittier conclude that identity formation is actually influenced by three factors:

(1) the creation of boundaries that insulate and differentiate a category of persons from the dominant society; (2) the development of consciousness that presumes the existence of socially constituted criteria that account for a group's structural position; and (3) the valorization of a group's "essential differences" through the politicization of everyday life.³⁵

³³ Doug McAdam, "Conceptual origins, current problems, future directions" in McAdam *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁴ Verta Taylor and Nancy E. Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movements: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization" in Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

In the case of Argentina, and presumably elsewhere, the growth of lesbian and gay visibility has also had an effect on *heterosexual* identity as well and has tightened the boundaries of what is acceptable for straight people. For example, one lesbian activist recounted how a straight woman once complained to her that because of all the talk about lesbianism, she could no longer be physically affectionate with her female friends because people might think she was a lesbian.³⁶

Forever told in myriad ways that homosexuality is wrong, perverted or evil, gay men and lesbians need to affirm that it is good, or at least acceptable. Thrown into a stigmatized collectivity, they rarely challenge the existence of the category; they reclaim it. Concomitantly, they will resist the heterosexualization of their space. An interesting illustrative event occurred when representatives of the *Liga Marxista* and the *Liga Socialista Revolucionaria*, two very small left-wing groups, attended a June 1996 coordination meeting for the Pride march. They offered their support for the march, even though they considered sexual orientation irrelevant, and requested the groups to lend their voices to defend two left-wing political prisoners being held in Neuquén. The response was very angry at their dismissal of the importance of sexuality: “Soy orgulloso de ser puto”, said one activist, to much agreement. No one defended the idea that the lesbian and gay movement should collectively mobilize on behalf of heterosexuals, though it was understood that groups and individuals should feel free to do so if they so chose. “Tenemos nuestra propia historia, santos y mártires”, replied another.

The Argentinean movement has known a progression rather different from its counterpart in the United States. The early American lesbian and gay movement of the 1950s and '60s consisted of assimilationist “homophile” organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society, succeeded by more radical groups like the Gay Liberation Front after the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, and is now mainly divided between rights-based goals (for example, the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) and integration advocacy (with prominent proponents such as Andrew Sullivan and Bruce Bawer seeking “a place at the table”)—which are not necessarily incompatible, as both focus on issues such as the right to serve in the army or get married. In Argentina, however, the first wave of activism was radical, as epitomized by the *Frente de Liberación Homosexual* (1969-76), followed—after a seven-year hiatus due to military repression—by the integrationist tendencies of the CHA (mid to late 1980s). With the formation of many new groups in the 1990s, however, Argentinean lesbian and gay activists have adopted a wide range of approaches and strategies that are sometimes mutually exclusive. The key difference among them is the minefield known as identity.

For heuristic purposes, I will divide Argentinean lesbian and gay political organizations into three different tendencies: (1) *assimilationist* groups that wish to integrate the lesbian and gay community into the “mainstream”, arguing that they are separated only by prejudice, *i.e.*, homophobia; (2) *civil rights-based* organizations, who mainly seek state-based legal guarantees and protection for sexual minorities; and (3) *radical* groups, who tend to deconstruct sexual identity.³⁷

³⁶ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 3, 1996.

³⁷ I have omitted from my typology of political groups: *archival* organizations (such as the *Biblioteca Gay-Lésbica* and *Escrita en el Cuerpo*), whose primary function is to collect documentation for public access; *religious* groups (like the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana*), who provide for the spiritual needs of the community; and *research* organizations (for example, *Grupo ISIS*), who are more interested in a scientific and social-scientific issues surrounding homosexuality. Membership in these types of groups does not preclude

Assimilation/integration

Assimilationist organizations, like the CHA of the 1990s and SIGLA, preach integration into mainstream Argentinean society. While the FLH chose to present the effeminate gay man and the butch lesbian as the most radical figures, these groups seek to portray homosexuals as being the same as everyone else, properly dressed in clothing commonly considered appropriate to their sex and manifesting little or no outward sign of gender deviance. They periodically protest defamation and discrimination, including through legal challenges. However, unlike the clandestine and revolutionary FLH, they desire recognition rather than to promote sexual liberation and to create a new order. These activists tend not to question, as did the FLH, the construction of sexuality. For them, lesbian and gay rights are but part of a redefinition of the relationship between the state and civil society, according the latter greater autonomy. Their strategy is to “normalize” homosexuality and, for that reason, they often prefer to work with various human rights organizations and sometimes even the government, than with other lesbian and gay groups. Alejandro Zalazar, CHA president since 1986, has accepted a human rights position with the Ministry of the Interior, which in the eyes of many activists has discredited both him and the CHA. Assimilationist/integrationist groups are especially reluctant to (a) accept bisexuality, because it puts in question the assumptions about people being either homo- or

belonging to more politically oriented ones as well, and their members often do support their work and participate in demonstrations.

Nor do I discuss *lesbian separatist* groups, such as *Las Lunas y las Otras* and the recently dissolved *Madres Lesbianas*. These groups provide a women-only space (literally, in the case of *La Casa de las Lunas*) for discussion and analysis, personal growth and cultural expression. Of all, they are the most isolationist, participating in few—if any—lesbian and gay community activities or sometimes not even accepting new members. One may surmise that the lesbian separatists have a strongly essentialist view of sex and sexuality. They are also the most rigid with boundaries when it comes to define “us” vs. “them”. For example, “pure” lesbians (who have never had intercourse with men) warrant a special respect and male-to-female transsexuals are not accepted as women—indeed, they are strongly repudiated by most radical lesbians. As a further illustration, *Las Lunas* would not even allow *Gays por los Derechos Civiles* to subscribe to their newsletter (interview, Buenos Aires, June 12, 1996). Their strategies involve reaching greater self-awareness, consciousness and empowerment through women- and lesbian-only activities, outside the reach of patriarchy. The closeted nature of their activities precludes political activism in the public sphere.

Finally, I have excluded the various *transgender* organizations, like the *Asociación de Travestis Argentinas* (ATA), *Travestis Unidas* (TU), and the recently formed *Organización de Travestis y Transexuales de la República Argentina* (OTTRA) and *Asociación por la Lucha de la Identidad de las Travestis* (ALIT), because I do not have sufficient information to distinguish them conceptually and analytically. Moreover, the struggle of transgendered people is somewhat different from that of gay men and lesbians: they seek a recognition of their personal gender identity rather than sexual orientation, a demand considered more radical by most. Nonetheless, transgender militancy is strong and visible.

heterosexual³⁸; and (b) work with transgendered people, because of their obvious difference in appearance and gender ambiguity, and even because they supposedly do not have a politics.³⁹

Civil rights

In 1991, *Gays y Lesbianas por los Derechos Civiles* (Gays DC) was founded to protect gays and lesbians' *civil* (not human) rights, deliberately refocusing the arena of struggle on civil society and not in opposition to the state. According to two of its founders, Gays DC was meant to fill a legal and political void left by the CHA's focus on AIDS and its own legal recognition.⁴⁰ Its motto was "En el origen de nuestra lucha está el deseo de todas las libertades", also indicating a desire to build bridges with other communities. Until its collapse at the end of 1996, Gays DC provided legal services to "sexual minorities" and HIV-positive individuals in case of discrimination or arrest, in the private and public sector. It worked actively for equal rights to be granted to homosexuals, such as the right to adopt or marry and the campaign it spearheaded for protection under the new Buenos Aires municipal charter. Its strategy was thus to seek for discriminatory laws to be repealed, for existing laws to be applied non-discriminatorily, and for new legal instruments to be enacted to protect the GLTT community from discrimination. This was done through a combination of case-work, lobbying and public demonstrations. Visibility, one of the main goals of *Lesbianas a la Vista* as well, is a means of justifying an increased attention to the needs of the GLTT community, a strategy for putting and keeping the issue on the public agenda. Given the risks of coming out in Argentine society, only a small minority of gay men and lesbians are open about their sexuality. The visibility strategy is thus also focused on civil society as a means to change attitudes and end discrimination.⁴¹

The use of a discourse of "sexual minorities" implies a treatment as a quasi-ethnic group, a strategy that echoes and updates the early CHA technique for linking groups and individuals that suffered from repression under the *Proceso*. These activists carefully avoid, however, mention of "human rights", as the term has lost the power it had in Argentina between 1983 and 1987. Instead, they encourage people to make connections between various positions of disadvantage, often stigmatized (though none more than homosexuality), and focus on discrimination rather than the nature of difference. For example, Gays DC co-sponsored a "La discriminación tiene cura" campaign, distributing 20,000 pamphlets on rights for sexual minorities and plastering 15,000 posters across the city.

As illustration of linking disadvantaged statuses, Senator María José Lubertino, then member of the Constituent Assembly for the *Unión Cívica Radical* (one of Argentina's two traditional political parties), during the debate over the inclusion of sexual orientation in the non-discrimination clause, used the following words to justify her support for it: "Aprobar esta

³⁸ For a detailed, cogently argued explanation of why lesbians and gay men are threatened by bisexuality, read Amanda Udis-Kessler, "Present Tense: Biphobia as a Crisis of Meaning" in Donald Morton, ed., *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); reprinted from Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu, eds., *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991).

³⁹ Interview with Rafael Freda, former CHA vice-president and current president of SIGLA, in *NX*, vol. 3, no. 31 (June 1996), p. 28. Nonetheless, the CHA appointed a transsexual to its executive in April 1996. She resigned in frustration before the end of the year (interview, Buenos Aires, February 6, 1997).

⁴⁰ Interviews, Buenos Aires, May 22 and 23, 1996.

⁴¹ Interview, Buenos Aires, May 27, 1996.

cláusula es para mí decir: yo soy judía, yo soy negra, yo soy la vieja que se ahorca porque no le alcanza la pensión, yo soy la lesbiana que se llevan presa por darle un beso a su pareja en la calle...”.⁴² To oppose it, this implies, is to be not only homophobic but also to be simultaneously anti-Semitic, racist and even driving starving grandmothers to suicide.

The civil-rights activist groups, whose members often work in an *ad-hoc* coalition, simultaneously resist the intrusion of the state into the private sphere and seek new state-sponsored legal guarantees and tools to protect equality. Indeed, state recognition is very important to some gay organizations (recall the CHA’s struggle for legal status) and the movement seeks to ensure its members’ access to equal protection under the law, as befits a liberal democratic system. It is nonetheless very much opposed to the state’s repressive apparatus, as well as the Church’s position on homosexuality and other social issues. In fact, the theme of the 1995 Pride march was “La discriminación nos condena, la policía nos mata, seguimos de pie”. This ambiguous relationship between the movement and the state (reflecting a position that is also both defensive and offensive) belies the tendency in the literature to present social movements as a clear-cut case of society vs. the state. These actors insert themselves into the existing political and economic structures and thus adopt what Jean Cohen refers to as “self-limiting radicalism”.⁴³ Pursuing “the path of civil rights” implies consciously choosing “legal reform, political access, visibility, and legitimation over the long-term goals of cultural acceptance, social transformation, understanding, and liberation”.⁴⁴ As American lesbian activist Urvashi Vaid points out,

civil rights can be won without displacing the moral and sexual hierarchy that enforces antigay stigmatization: you do not have to recognize the fundamental humanity of gay people in order to agree that they should be treated equally and fairly under the law.... As long as the rights-oriented movement refuses to address these social institutions and cultural forces, we cannot eradicate homophobic prejudice.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, it would be erroneous to describe these organizations’ actions as always institutionalized and liberal; demonstrations are often flamboyant (playing on the symbolic field), disruptive and illegal. Nor is it correct to portray them as merely taking advantage of opportunities; they also create them.

A key ally in any visibility-oriented strategy is the news media. Without coverage, the impact of a demonstration is strictly limited. The media can diffuse the images and ideas to millions of readers and viewers, and thus “play a central role in the construction of meaning and the reproduction of culture”.⁴⁶ Argentinean activists are very successful at garnering media

⁴² Escrita en el Cuerpo, “Prohibido discriminar en Buenos Aires”, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 664 and 670.

⁴⁴ Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 179 and 183.

⁴⁶ William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, “Framing political opportunity” in McAdam *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 287. This influence can be positive or negative. For example, a survey of newspaper clippings at the *Biblioteca Gay-Lésbica* reveals that article most often mentioned male homosexuality during the second half of the 1980s in association with bar raids, fights, murders and other violence, and prison sentences. Little or no mention of lesbianism is made. Many articles use antipathetic phrases such as “quien padecía desviaciones homosexuales” (“Pavoroso”, *Sur*, November 6, 1989, p. 15) and present the Church’s views, though some self-presentation does

coverage for their events. They do so by combining good personal relations with journalists and the design of innovative images that attract media attention, without necessarily closing off channels of institutional influence, as would happen if they used violence. Indeed, as McAdam states, the most effective strategy involves “master[ing] the art of simultaneously playing to a variety of publics, threatening opponents, and pressuring the state, all the while appearing nonthreatening and sympathetic to the media and other publics”.⁴⁷

Radical groups

I would characterize radical and separatist groups primarily by their rejection of the system. The mixed ones, such as the University of Buenos Aires-based *Colectivo Eros* and the *Grupo de Jóvenes Gays y Lesbianas “Construyendo Nuestra Sexualidad”*, function mainly internally. Though they participate in wider political actions, the collective works mainly on university-based issues and activities, while the youth group performs its principal function of providing an arena for young people struggling with their sexuality. Though the latter began as a closed discussion group, it is now advertising its meetings and trying to attract new members. Its members are also particularly visible at demonstrations.

These groups have apparently adopted a more social-constructivist approach to sexuality, rejecting the prevalent essentialized notions about fixed “either/or” sexuality. Instead, they prefer to see sexual orientation as a continuum, in which all people have varying degrees of proclivities (which can also vary over time), and to avoid rigidly dividing the world into homo and hetero, even with a residual “bi” category. They attach value to gay and sexual liberation, often reclaiming the heritage of the FLH, likewise valuing their marginality, pointing out that human rights discourse places no value on difference. These activists openly criticize what they see as the mainstream movement (the “Jurassic Park” of old-time activists) for failing to adopt a longer-term view and analysis, as well as for making concessions in exchange for tolerance. They are particularly vehement in their disagreement with the tactics of some of the assimilationist groups, in at least one case considering them worse enemies than the police “because at least the police don’t pretend to be our friends”. The radical groups are also a lot more likely to link not just oppressed groups (like the previous categories in my typology) but also causes of oppression under capitalism. They trace links between neoliberal policies, high unemployment, poverty, alienation, anomie, discrimination, and so forth. For example, they argue that the question of AIDS cannot be divorced from the health-care and education systems, both of which are under attack from current neoliberal economic policies. Their ultimate goal is not just equality for lesbians and gays but a transformation of society, not just in terms of sexuality, but in terms of liberation of the human spirit.⁴⁸ Because their goals are so abstract, a concrete strategy is difficult to define. In addition, such multiple goals tend to spread resources thin and promote internal divisions over prioritization.⁴⁹

occur in the form of interviews. In the 1990s, coverage becomes more positive and focuses more on discrimination and rights, hate crimes, gay pride, and possible genetic causes of homosexuality.

⁴⁷ Doug McAdam, “The framing function of movement tactics: Strategic dramaturgy in the American civil rights movement” in McAdam *et al.*, p. 344.

⁴⁸ Interviews, Buenos Aires, June 14 and 18, 1996.

⁴⁹ McAdam *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Several students of social movements have documented how movement extremists help the cause of less radical activists by making their demands seem more moderate.⁵⁰ There is little evidence of this in Argentina today, as the more radical groups have the least visibility. This could change if some radical group began to explode bombs or kidnap prominent figures, however no one is advocating such measures. Nonetheless, it is possible that moderate groups are benefiting at least a little from a historical comparison to the FLH.

In spite of their differences, collaboration between these diverse groups is possible, for it is true that “Movements may largely be born of environmental opportunities, but their fate is heavily shaped by their own actions”.⁵¹ During the 1990s, encouraged by increased lesbian and gay visibility, many groups were formed to fill the gaps that initially the CHA and later others did not fill, some the result of factionalism, others of separate lesbian organizing. Why did these groups rather suddenly begin to work together in 1995? An adequate explanation must combine several contributing factors. In part, it was the issues surrounding transgendered people and the clear and brutal discrimination from which they suffer, especially at the hands of the police, that rallied many gay, lesbian and transgendered activists to a common cause. Groups that prefer to work independently tend to be those who do not want to work with transvestites and transsexuals. Some groups, however, collaborate *in spite of* the inclusion of transgender issues on the lesbian and gay agenda (see above)—so that explanation is insufficient.

An important factor was personal contacts between individuals that built trust between gay men, lesbians and transgendered people and allowed them to work together. The various activists had to make conscious efforts to overcome prejudice; for example, gay men examined their own *machismo* and misogyny, and familiarized themselves with concerns specifically affecting lesbians. For lesbians, working with male-dominated groups meant toning down the feminist content of their discourse. (*Lesbianas a la Vista*, a prominent group, has been criticized precisely for this by some lesbian feminists who consider it “selling out” to the men.) The cooperation between lesbians/gays and transgendered activists also required overcoming much prejudice on both parts. Lesbians were (and many continue to be) especially suspicious of the male-born but woman-identified. For the transsexuals, it also involved leaving a very closed subculture.

A third factor that contributed to the new cooperation between organizations was the international model, which not only demonstrated how different groups could work together, but the benefits of doing so. One activist suggested that for the lesbian groups, it had been important to work with women only for an initial period in order to gather the necessary strength. Unlike in other countries, though, AIDS played a very minor role in coalition-building, despite the fact that 70-80% of HIV transmissions is through homosexual contact.⁵²

Yet this the dreams of cooperation and quasi-unity dissipated by the end of 1996, as ideological cleavages resurfaced, rooted in contradictory conceptions of identity and its meaning. Even among those who talk about the social construction of sexual identity, it is very easy to slip back into essentialism. A female activist presented the case to me that lesbians were not women,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵¹ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes—towards a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements” in *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵² Interviews, Buenos Aires, June 3-12, 1996

acknowledging that she had read the work of Monique Wittig,⁵³ but still felt solidarity over issues such as abortion.⁵⁴ One male activist said the same thing to me about gays not being men.⁵⁵ This strikes me as quasi-separatist essentialism, yet both of these activists also admitted to being attracted to members of the opposite sex and seeing desire as less-than-fixed.

As Joshua Gamson points out, however, “Fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis of political power”.⁵⁶ To eliminate the categories of sexual orientation would end oppression yet also destroy the identity of the activists, which is unimaginable to most, if not all. Yet accepting transgendered people into a common movement was a first step to dismantling the restricted essentialized identity of “lesbian or gay”. Surprisingly this was done in Argentina before any inclusion of bisexuals, contrary to the progression in North America, Australia and Western European countries. According to one Argentinean activist, this may have had something to do with a legacy from the FLH:

Con la idea de que no por ser homosexual uno deja de ser hombre el FLH vela en la “marica” el auténtico homosexual rebelde, de ahí que fuera también el más perseguido. La “marica” era el verdadero desafío a los roles sexuales estereotipados y la más auténtica ruptura con la cultura machista, creando así un antecedente apropiado para luego enmarcar la discusión acerca del travesti y el transexual.⁵⁷

In fact, it is only since June 1996 that bisexuality is addressed at all in the GLTT movement in Argentina, when a male and female activist openly entered into a romantic relationship—which created much uproar in the community. The woman for example, was told that she had forfeited the right to speak on behalf of lesbians. Now, it seems that bisexuality is being progressively integrated into the movement’s discourse, a second step to dismantling the homo/hetero binary. In November 1996, a number of groups formally agreed to henceforth include bisexuals when naming “sexual minorities” in public documents and events.⁵⁸

What does this mean for politics? It appears that what has been called “the queer dilemma” is surfacing: “At the heart of the dilemma is the simultaneity of cultural sources of oppression (which make loosening categories a smart strategy) and institutional sources of oppression (which make tightening categories a smart strategy)”.⁵⁹ Are lesbians, gay men and transgendered people the same as straight people, or are they different? A recent campaign by the *Federación Universitaria de Argentina*, co-sponsored by Gays DC, *Lesbianas a la Vista* and other groups, argues that both are true. “SI a la diversidad, NO a la discriminación por la orientación sexual. Somos diferentes, somos iguales”, reads one of their flyers (see annex). A poster of theirs starts with a list of possible relations (“Somos hijos, madres, hermanos, primas,

⁵³ See Monique Wittig, “The straight mind”, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 12, 1996.

⁵⁵ Interview, Buenos Aires, June 14, 1996.

⁵⁶ Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self Destruct? A Queer Dilemma”, *Social Problems*, vol. 42, no. 3 (Fall 1995), p. 391.

⁵⁷ Marcelo Ferreyra, untitled speech given in Santiago, Chile, November 1993, on behalf of *Gays por los Derechos Civiles*, photocopy.

⁵⁸ Alejandra Sardá, “Argentina: 1996 Report” (Escrita en el Cuerpo, servicio electrónico de noticias, December 18, 1996).

⁵⁹ Gamson, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

abuelos...”), followed by professions (“profesoras, maestros, curas, médicos...”), some stereotypical (“peluqueros...”), some not (“policías...”), ending with “seropositivos, jóvenes, viejas, niños, travestis, transexuales, gays, lesbianas.” Below, between a picture of two men kissing and one of two women kissing reads the text, in larger print, “Tan diferentes como vos”. Like you, we’re all different in our own ways, the message is, so don’t discriminate. Yet simultaneously, we’re everywhere and no more different than anyone else, so don’t discriminate.

Nonetheless, “the postmodern celebration of diversity” is insufficient.⁶⁰ It must be made desirable, into a strength. As Steven Epstein writes: “Rather than reifying difference into a defensive separatism or dissolving it into a false vision of homogeneity, we need to acquire an appreciation for difference as harmless, perhaps synergistic”.⁶¹ There has to be a middle ground between assimilation and isolation, where diversity is seen as an asset. Otherwise, any social movement will waste its potential for broader social change.

The idea of a “global community” of lesbians and gays is a misleading one, for it erases other power differentials. As Vaid writes, “A false assumption underlies all gay and lesbian organizing: that there is something at once singular and universal that can be called gay or lesbian or bisexual or even transgendered identity”.⁶² Argentinean lesbians and gay men cannot be detached from local conditions and other subject positionings. At some point, individual activists and the movement in general will have to acknowledge that

...identities cannot be frozen or lived outside of interaction with other identities. Individuals occupy multiple social positions, and no interpretation of those positions could long endure that dissolved all of them into a single, totalizing identity. People may for a while make political and social choices overwhelmingly with reference to one dimension of their social position (as black, for example). But nothing fixes identities in such a way as to rule out future reinterpretations (for example, an interpretation framed by gender relations or occupational structures). The impermanence of political-social identities is further guaranteed by social change that puts in question identities established at the individual level.⁶³

Identity politics is thus bound to reach an impasse by isolating one defining variable. The integrationist/assimilationist organizations have already rejected identity politics to a certain degree by seeking to collaborate with other (non sexually defined) groups. But they do so more by abandoning than embracing their difference. The alternative would be to move beyond, rather than deny, the basis for differentiation according to sexual orientation, perhaps along the lines of a right to “sexual dissent”, as proposed by Lisa Duggan.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Barbara Epstein, “Rethinking Social Movement Theory”, *Socialist Review*, vol. 20, nos. 90/91 (1990), p. 58.

⁶¹ Steven Epstein, “Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism”, *Socialist Review*, vol. 17, nos. 93/94 (1987), p. 99. In a footnote to this sentence, he notes: “This implies a greater degree of acceptance among the gay community of those who stand at the ‘boundary’, namely bisexuals”.

⁶² Vaid, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁶³ David Plotke, “What’s So New About New Social Movements?”, *Socialist Review*, vol. 20, nos. 90/91 (1990), p. 94.

⁶⁴ See Lisa Duggan, “Queering the State”, in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, eds., *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Conclusion and a look ahead

Lesbian and gay movements are an excellent example of the “new paradigm of politics”: social movements actors valuing “personal autonomy and identity” and seeking civil equality, rather than organizing as a socioeconomic group seeking the redistribution of wealth or the conquest of political power. Furthermore, these organizations tend to be informal, spontaneous, with a low degree of horizontal and vertical differentiation, unlike formal, large-scale representative organizations partaking in pluralist or corporatist interest intermediation under the “old paradigm”.⁶⁵ Perhaps it would therefore be preferable to speak not of “new social movements” but of “new democratic struggles”, as does Chantal Mouffe.⁶⁶

In summary, I argue that the emergence of the lesbian and gay activism depended on the prior creation and diffusion of a lesbian and gay identity, which in turn rested on certain social-historical conditions that came into being in the 1940s and 1950s. The timing of the foundation of the FLH occurred decades later, owing more to a global protest cycle and the diffusion of ideas than to an actual change in local conditions. Its demise, however, was due to domestic factors alone: new insurmountable constraints in the form of a sudden increase in violent repression and the military coup of 1976. The emergence of the movement and the foundation of the CHA in 1984 was the direct result of a democratic opening and that gave activists (1) new opportunities to oppose the violence and discrimination that, contrary to their expectations, they continued to experience under democratic rule (such as access to the media and the possibility of holding peaceful demonstrations) and (2) a new human rights discourse with which to link their struggle with others who had opposed military rule, as well as (3) key international models and support. The expansion of the movement after 1990 was due to a combination of increased visibility, too narrow a focus and incompatible views within the CHA, and the emergence of separate lesbian organizations. The lesbian and gay groups, in their various ways, take advantage of these new opportunities and, through their actions, create new ones for themselves. The recent increased collaboration between these groups, however tenuous, was due to a combination of several factors: the inclusion of transgender issues, personal contacts, group self-confidence and willingness to compromise, and international models.

This analysis, however, is incomplete without a deeper look at identity. We cannot understand the differences among lesbian and gay groups without considering their visions of identity, nor can we fully understand how they can or cannot work together, what the dynamics are and what the future may hold. It is my belief that when examining lesbian and gay movements, it is insufficient to consider them as one does other so-called new social movements. For race- and ethnic-based movements, identity is acquired in the home, the family, the neighborhood, based on physical and/or cultural differences. For lesbians and gay men, identity is a result of transgressive sexual desire that sometimes becomes a fundamental point of personal

⁶⁵ Claus Offe, “New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of International Politics”, *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 832.

⁶⁶ Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy” in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 89-101. Quoted in David Slater, “New Social Movements and Old Political Questions: Rethinking State–Society Relations in Latin American Development”, *International Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 32.

definition. It would be naive to treat this as merely a subculture or as one would members of the peace movement, for example. For the lesbian and gay movement, looking at identity provides pieces of the puzzle that political opportunity structures alone cannot. The fuller picture includes a more nuanced explanation of the emergence of the movement and its possible future.

The recent surge in organization and visibility among lesbian and gay Argentineans may be misleading: it does not represent much growth in the activist community, being more the result of splintering and the work of a small number of very dedicated individuals. It is also strongly concentrated in the Buenos Aires area, though some groups, notably the *Colectivo Arco-Iris* in Rosario, have recently formed outside the capital (where the Church is more influential and people are more socially conservative), including most recently in Jujuy, Lobos, Neuquén and Mar del Plata.

Given the never-ending conflicts within a very diverse community and often contradictory strategies and goals, it is my impression that, for the time being, the different groups will continue to cooperate around specific short-term issues and actions, though not become any more unified. Yet they are taking steps to erode rigid boundary systems, notably by recently including bisexuals and transgendered people under the same banner as lesbians and gay men. This could eventually lead to a lessened emphasis on issues geared to a discrete community and more on issues that affect a wider and less-defined group of people who lack equal opportunities.

How can the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement best achieve its goals? Much depends on the very identification of goals. The macro-goal of assimilationists—the integration of gay men and lesbians into the “mainstream”—would require an end of any discourse of difference. Given the strength of identity and prejudice, this does not seem possible, nor do their strategies and activities do much to promote it.

Current civil-rights strategies are reasonably effective in Buenos Aires, but change on the national level is proving much more limited. To achieve more radical change, including in the cultural sphere, could require moving beyond identity politics in tandem with other (non sexually defined) actors. This would imply further limiting collaboration with accommodationist lesbian and gay activists, who value acceptance over challenging broader issues of social change.

Drucker concludes that:

The vision of gay-lesbian liberation in each country will be developed out of its movement's own experiences, and through dialogue among different currents. But the most fruitful approaches to gay-lesbian liberation will probably be those that combine sexual radicalism with coalition-building, link gay-lesbian demands with strategies for broader social transformation, and build unitary left organizations alongside independent lesbian and gay groups. Left opposition to repression and discrimination, and left support for self-organization by oppressed people are the keys.⁶⁷

Faith in the Left, however, may be misplaced, given its limited strength in Argentina in the 1990s and its weak commitment to lesbian and gay rights. Other social movements may provide better allies as agents of change, ones that share a more holistic analysis of current socioeconomic problems. Trade unions, for example, have a long activist history in Argentina and would theoretically make good partners for change. However, given the current difficult economic and political situation in Argentina, social movements in general tend to be increasingly on the

⁶⁷ Drucker, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

defensive, trying to maintain what they have achieved since democratization rather than demanding new concessions. For those who seek it, social transformation therefore remains a very long-term project.

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