"Con discriminación y represión no hay democracia"

The Lesbian and Gay Movement in Argentina

by
Stephen Brown

Lesbian and gay activism now circles the globe, but it is vastly understudied. Not even the latest syntheses of contemporary social-movement theory discuss lesbian and gay movements to any significant degree (see McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996).[1] Even the most important works on "social theory" tend to ignore sexuality (Warner, 1993: ix). A lack of activism cannot explain this deficiency, since formal lesbian and gay organizations have existed in the United States since the 1950s and have become prominent in North America and Western Europe in the past 30 years. During the past decade, many developing countries have become the sites of burgeoning movements as well. Lesbian and gay organizations now exist in every country in Latin America, some of them dating back to the mid-1980s (Drucker, 1996: 92), yet only one of the major volumes on social movements in Latin America addresses sexual orientation or identity (see MacRae, 1992, on Brazil).

Argentina hosts a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement[2] that is sometimes quite visible and results in concrete political advances, such as the inclusion in 1996 of a clause in the municipal constitution of Buenos Aires that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In this

Stephen Brown is a postdoctoral fellow in the University of Toronto's Department of Political Science. He is currently revising a book manuscript on foreign aid and political reform in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on Kenya and Malawi. He is also researching the role of the international community in the prevention of violent conflict in Kenya. His recent publications include articles in *Third World Quarterly* and *Southern Africa Report*. Previous versions of this article were presented at the Latin American Studies Association conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, April 19, 1997, and the 92d annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Toronto, Ontario, August 10, 1997. The field research was conducted in Buenos Aires in May-June 1996 and February 1997 and included in-depth interviews with some 20 activists belonging to a dozen lesbian, gay, and transgender organizations and a few members of human rights and AIDS organizations and attendance at planning meetings, demonstrations, fund-raisers, and social events. The author thanks all those who commented on earlier drafts of this article, especially Elisabeth J. Wood. He is grateful to Christopher Mitchell and New York University's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies for an initial research grant. Finally, he thanks the numerous Argentineans (and one Uruguayan) who were so generous with their time and assistance.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 123, Vol. 29 No. 2, March 2002 119-138
© 2002 Latin American Perspectives

article I explain how the lesbian and gay movement emerged and later expanded in Argentina and why it did so at that point in time. I argue that a conjunction of local and global cycles of protest, depending on the earlier diffusion of lesbian and gay identity, led to the birth of activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These favorable conditions were then eclipsed by constraints that were solely domestic, causing the abrupt end of activism in the mid-1970s. During the 1980s, however, a mostly new generation of lesbian and gay activists took advantage of new political opportunities—essentially the return to democratic rule, the human rights discourse, and some international support—to form a movement. Thus, our analysis is enriched by adopting the political-opportunity-structures approach to social movements, even if the literature underestimates the significance of identity and identity formation. Clearly, activism requires the prior diffusion of lesbian and gay identity, though identity and opportunities do not in themselves automatically produce a movement. Although one cannot draw definitive conclusions from a single case study, this article suggests that social movement theorists should question more deeply the nature of identity, especially when looking at sexuality, and examine both its origins and its consequences. This will allow a better understanding of the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement and encourage a fuller analysis of social movements in general.

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

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT SITUATION

In November 1969, while Argentina was under military rule, the Grupo Nuestro Mundo (Our World Group) was founded in Buenos Aires, becoming the first gay political organization in Latin America (though informal social groups had previously existed). In 1971 the Grupo Nuestro Mundo and several others, including mostly male left-wing university students, anarchists, and religious organizations, joined to form the radical Frente de Liberación Homosexual (Homosexual Liberation Front—FLH). Even after the democratic elections in 1973 and the return to power of Juan Perón, the FLH remained an essentially clandestine group, closely associating itself with the

fight for women's and workers' rights both in Argentina and around the world. After Perón's death in 1974, during the presidency of his widow, Isabel, there was a rapid upsurge of right-wing paramilitary attacks on homosexuals. In a short period of time, the number of FLH members fell from a hundred to a dozen. Some of them were tortured or murdered after the military coup in March 1976. Several left the country, and those who remained suspended their public activities. The FLH dissolved in June of that year.[3]

Under the brutal military dictatorship, formal lesbian and gay activism disappeared. By the end of 1982, however, a few new groups had emerged and created a coordinating committee (Coordinadora de Grupos Gays). By that point it was increasingly recognized that military rule would not last much longer. However, between January 1982 and November 1983 a former member of the FLH and at least 17 other gay men were murdered, and only 2 of the cases were solved. In June 1982 a paramilitary group known as the Comando Cóndor declared its intent to "wipe out" homosexuals. The commission later appointed to investigate disappearances (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas—CONADEP) does not mention in its final report, *Nunca Más*, that 400 or more lesbians and gay men had been disappeared, according to the estimate of a former commission member (Gays por los Derechos Civiles, 1995: 3-4).

In 1983, after the military dictatorship had collapsed and democratic elections were held, lesbian and gay life in Argentina flourished. Many bars and clubs opened, taking advantage of the liberalization. The rebirth of activism, however, was due as much to continued repression as to new freedoms. Repression had not disappeared under democratic rule, but expectations had grown. In April 1984, soon after police officers arrested approximately 200 people in the raid of a gay club, 150 activists met in the gay bar Contramano and formed the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (Argentinean Homosexual Community—CHA). Activists were apparently influenced by the mass rallies that took place at the end of military rule and by the desire for new understandings after the discrediting of traditional institutions such as the military, the state, and the church, which had collaborated with the dictatorship (Marcelo Ferreyra, interview, Buenos Aires, May 23, 1996). The CHA's founding members were a politically diverse assortment of gay men and lesbians, 14 of whom were willing to acknowledge their homosexuality publicly (Jáuregui, 1987: 202). The CHA opened several chapters outside the capital and for the rest of the decade remained by far the most important group. By the mid-1990s, the organization's influence had waned, but it was given a new life in 1997 when a different set of activists began to operate under the CHA banner.

In the early 1990s, under the presidency of Carlos Menem, Argentinean popular movements in general were on the decline, but lesbian and gay groups proliferated. A lesbian feminist group, Las Lunas y las Otras (an untranslatable pun literally meaning "The Moons and the Others"), met for the first time in July 1990. In 1991 the CHA was formally recognized by the government after a long battle, fueling much public debate over homosexuality and paving the way for the formation of other groups. Having achieved its main objective, the CHA then succumbed to an identity crisis over what its goals and strategy should be. Internal disagreement, both personal and ideological, surfaced, and many members resigned. Several founded their own groups, such as the Sociedad de Integración Gay-Lésbica Argentina (Argentinean Society for Gay and Lesbian Integration—SIGLA), the Grupo de Investigación en Sexualidad e Interacción Social (Research Group on Sexuality and Social Interaction—Grupo ISIS) and Gays y Lesbianas por los Derechos Civiles (Gays and Lesbians for Civil Rights, known as Gays DC). In addition, Ilse Fuskova's appearance on national television in September 1991 as an out lesbian galvanized many lesbians into activism and greater visibility and led to the formation of the Convocatoria Lesbiana. The first among numerous transgender groups, Transexuales por el Derecho a la Vida y la Identidad (Transsexuals for the Right to Life and Identity) was founded in May 1991. The first lesbian and gay pride march took place in July 1992.

Though over 30 groups have sprung up since the early 1990s, they are all quite limited in size and are led by a very small number of leaders, while a larger group of activists do volunteer work and often participate in public activities without getting involved in policy debates. On occasion, well-planned demonstrations draw on a larger pool of participants. For example, over 1,000 lesbians and gay men "at large," that is, not formally involved in the movement, participate in the annual pride marches. However, not much effort is made to recruit new people into the activist circle. Though Argentina's pride demonstrations are among the largest in Latin America, the movement is far from able, as one then-member of the CHA executive pointed out (Enrique J. Rojas, interview, Buenos Aires, June 3, 1996), to fill the Plaza de Mayo—the measure of success of Argentinean social movements since the days of General Perón. In fact, by the late 1990s the gay organization that attracted the greatest participation was the athletic group Deportistas Argentinos Gay (Gay Sportsmen of Argentina—DAG), which regularly brought together up to 75 people every week but with little or no political content (Mario Pecheny, interview, Chicago, September 28, 1998).

A large number of gay groups trace their roots to the CHA, having split off from it or, like Gays DC, having been founded by former CHA members a few years after leaving the organization. Almost all but the youngest gay

male activists began their involvement in the CHA. Many lesbians have had various degrees of contact and involvement with the CHA, several having left the organization over the men's sexism. The lesbian-specific groups, though, trace their origins more to the feminist movement.

Although over the years like-minded groups have formed temporary alliances (for example, the Lesbian Front), it was only in 1995 that male-dominated groups and women-only groups began to meet on a regular basis and cooperate on short-term projects. Their first concrete act was to organize a national gathering of lesbian, gay, and transgender organizations, held in Rosario in March 1996 and now an annual event. (It was at that point that transgendered people were accepted into the lesbian and gay movement, at least as close allies.) Their second major undertaking was to organize the fifth annual pride march (expanding its title to include the transgendered), held on June 28, 1996. The third was the previously mentioned campaign to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the new Buenos Aires municipal charter.

THE EMERGENCE OF A MOVEMENT

The collapse of the ultraconservative military regime and redemocratization in 1983 provided a new space and vocabulary for the lesbian and gay movement. The conditions for organizing around sexual identity, however, rested on prior structural (social-historical) changes and international diffusion. As in many other countries, in Argentina the relationship between lesbians and gays and the state, notably the police, is a difficult one. The police often raid bars and clubs and use various legal provisions to harass and detain lesbians and gay men without necessarily charging them with any crime. Thousands of transgendered people are arrested every year (Gays por los Derechos Civiles, 1995: 33). While in custody they are often verbally and physically abused with impunity. Some disappear and are later found murdered, and the cases go uninvestigated.[4]

National laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation exist in some 20 countries, only a few of which—Ecuador, post-apartheid South Africa, and Fiji—are in the developing world. Not even in many Western liberal democracies are lesbians and gay men guaranteed rights equal to those of other collective groups. In the United States, for instance, private consensual gay sex between adults is currently illegal in 19 states. Though sodomitical acts were never legally prohibited in twentieth-century Argentina, lesbians and gay men do not receive equal treatment before the law. Until 1990, for example, they were barred from voting in the province of

Buenos Aires, though this provision was not enforced (nor could it be). With the exception of situations that fall under the jurisdiction of the city of Buenos Aires, individuals can currently be fired, denied housing, or otherwise discriminated against solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. Not even formal laws, however, can guarantee legal protection: one can find other reasons to fire an employee, and the police can use other methods to detain someone, for instance, by planting evidence.

Historically, the Argentine state has not recognized "sexual minorities" as legitimate collective actors and members of civil society. For years, the CHA was prevented from fund-raising and taking official positions by the government's refusal to grant it legal status. The Supreme Court defended this position, using justifications based on the Catholic Church's position, the protection of the family, and medical opinion (Robinson, 1991). Leftist political parties have on occasion spoken in favor of lesbian and gay rights and fielded openly lesbian and gay candidates, not one of whom has ever been elected. However, prejudice and/or fear of losing popular support have prevented much of the left from allying itself with gay politics. There is no equivalent in Argentina to Brazil's Workers' party, which has forged a working relationship with a broad range of social movements, including the lesbian and gay one. In Argentina, power historically alternates between the Radical party and the Justicialistas (Peronists), neither of which has indicated much support on issues relating to sexuality. On these matters, many lesbian and gay Argentineans hope for the emergence of a third party. Though some members of the center-left Frente por un País Solidario (Front for a Solidary Country—FREPASO) have voiced support for antidiscrimination measures, their coalition government with the Radicals (1999-2001) did not result in any new legislation.

From the moment it was founded, the CHA adopted a strategy of working with other social movements on matters such as human rights, violence, and AIDS. The CHA wanted to forge links with other people and groups repressed by the dictatorship. This is well illustrated by the advertisement it published in the daily newspaper *Clarín* on May 28, 1984, under a headline that read "WITH DISCRIMINATION AND REPRESSION THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY" (see Jáuregui, 1987: 225). The ad argued that "no true democracy can exist if society permits the persistence of marginalization and the various means of repression that still prevail" and referred to the more than 1.5 million homosexual citizens as people "who are worried about the national situation and who, like you, went through the hard years of the dictatorship."[5] It thus invited readers, who, whatever their views on homosexuality, were almost sure at that point to be opponents of military rule, to identify

with gay men and lesbians and consequently back their struggle for a democracy without discrimination or repression.

To build bridges with other human rights organizations, the CHA adopted the motto "Freedom to express one's sexuality is a human right"[6] and an approach to lesbian and gay rights based on the human rights discourse, which was popular because of its contribution to the end of the dictatorship. The government, however, subsequently made several major concessions to the military, which greatly reduced the persuasive power of a human-rights-based approach. As a result, in 1987 the CHA decided to concentrate on AIDS instead. The organization began an AIDS prevention program, and its newsletter, *Vamos a Andar*, suddenly focused on HIV/AIDS. The CHA also redirected its efforts from organizing around sexual orientation toward gaining legal recognition by the government.

Argentinean activism receives important inspiration and support from abroad. From the 1970s to the present, gay publications in Argentina show a close identification with the lives, struggles, and cultural activities of lesbians and gay men around the world, especially in the United States and Europe. Argentineans likewise use the same symbols and representations (such as pink triangles and rainbow flags) and reclaimed historical figures, further diffusing a global, essentialized identity. Naturally, the meaning of being gay or lesbian can vary in different contexts. However, the lesbian and gay movement has benefited from international opportunity structures. For instance, the CHA's campaign for legal recognition was aided by an organized campaign to ask Menem about the matter repeatedly while he was visiting the United States in 1991.[7] Foreign organizations, such as the Norwegian Red Cross and the American Foundation for AIDS Research, also funded the AIDS programs of Argentinean gay groups. Funds were greatly reduced after 1994, however, and AIDS-awareness campaigns and safer-sex outreach programs in Argentina soon disappeared (Javier Hourcade, interview, Buenos Aires, June 4, 1996).

Long-time activists commonly mention that their work is inspired by their counterparts abroad, sometimes following close interaction. For example, Ilse Fuskova, who—as mentioned earlier—was among the first lesbians to be out nationally, states that she was emboldened by the years she spent working with lesbians in Germany and San Francisco. Models abroad also provided the idea of creating lesbian and gay archives in Argentina. Lesbian and gay identity, culture, representations, and sense of community are further diffused by contact at international meetings (for example, the Beijing Women's Conference, the periodic Latin American Feminist Gatherings, and meetings sponsored by the International Lesbian and Gay Association) and

increasingly via the Internet. One can therefore conclude that the earlier international diffusion of lesbian and gay identity and models of activism both contributed to the emergence and expansion of activism in Argentina, surpassing the political opportunities afforded by concrete financial support.

BRINGING IDENTITY BACK IN

A large part of the literature on social movements focuses on resource mobilization and obtaining policy results. This approach analyzes 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" (Cohen, 1985: 674-675). This emphasis on the mechanics and outcomes of protest movements improves on prior grievance-based conceptions of social movements. In a wider sense, a focus on political opportunity structures is a useful way to understand case dynamics through the opportunities and constraints that the movement encounters. In the case of Argentina, this involves linking the lesbian and gay movement to democratization, the human rights discourse, and the international dimension. Other analytical tools are still required, however, because this approach ignores motivation, differing understandings, beliefs, priorities, and visions, and the dynamic and sometimes contradictory relationships between individuals and groups, so much of which relates to identity.

Since political opportunities constitute "but a necessary prerequisite to action," the current consensus in comparative social movements is to analyze the "framing process" as well. This term refers to "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996: 6, 8). Rather than considering the nature of identity, this concept is usually limited to prevailing culture and ideas/ideology. Though I do not wish to "reproduce the ideological self-understanding of actors or slip into a social-psychological analysis of struggle" through a "pure identity-oriented analysis of social movements" (Cohen, 1985: 695), I will now discuss identity formation and its relationship with lesbian and gay politics in Argentina.

A crest in an international protest cycle including the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York,[8] mass student demonstrations in France and Mexico in 1968, and the growing women's liberation movement, as well as left-wing activism (galvanized by the Cuban Revolution) across Latin America and Western Europe, contributed to the timing of the emergence of gay activism in Argentina. Domestic events, including larger-scale opposition to military rule,

notably the protests in Córdoba (known as the Cordobazo), burgeoning left-wing activism, and the prominent guerrilla movement, also played a large role. Thus, in the case of Argentina, we find support for 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" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996: 33), at least for the FLH in the early 1970s. Stated otherwise, Argentinean gay activism was born not out of concrete changes in domestic conditions, but as part of a domestic and international moment of protesting existing social relations, adapting the examples of others to local circumstances and likely inspiring other actors in turn.

In the early 1970s, a member group of the FLH proclaimed, "We don't have to liberate homosexuals, we must liberate the homosexual in everyone"[9] (inspired by a similar slogan of New York's Gay Liberation Front). The implication was that gay men and lesbians are essentially the same as everyone else; they have merely embraced a potential that all people have. This does not imply that everyone should be gay. In fact, it argues for the elimination of the categorization of sexual orientation.

Paradoxically, organizing around identity in effect strengthens the categories of identity and the boundaries that separate them (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 111). In Argentina (and elsewhere, one may assume) greater lesbian and gay visibility has also affected *hetero*sexual identity and more clearly limited what behavior is considered appropriate for straight people. A heterosexual woman once complained to a lesbian activist that because so much publicity was being given to lesbianism she no longer showed physical affection for female friends for fear of being mistaken for a lesbian (Claudina Marek, interview, Buenos Aires, June 3, 1996).

Faced with constant messages that they are inferior, abnormal, sick, perverted, or evil, gay men and lesbians argue that homosexuality is good or at least acceptable. In a society in which their existence is stigmatized, they tend not to argue, as the FLH did, for the abolition of the category. Instead, they reclaim it, reinforce it. As a result, Argentinean activists resist heterosexual encroachment on their space. An event from a June 1996 meeting to coordinate the pride march provides an excellent illustration: two members of the Marxist League and the Revolutionary Socialist League, both very small left-wing groups, offered their support, while saying that their groups did not believe that sexual orientation was an issue. They asked that in return the lesbian and gay groups support their efforts to defend two left-wing political prisoners being held in Neuquén. Gay activists responded with great anger to their dismissal of the importance of sexuality: "I am proud to be a faggot,"

furiously proclaimed one, to much audible support. No one supported the proposition that the lesbian and gay movement should act collectively on behalf of heterosexuals, though groups and individuals were free to show support if they wanted to. "We have our own history, saints, and martyrs," asserted another activist.[10]

The first instance of gay activism in Argentina, led by the Frente de Liberación Homosexual (1969-1976), was radical. After a seven-year break attributable to military repression, the CHA emerged, adopting a more integrationist approach (mid- to late 1980s). In the 1990s, however, the numerous new groups embraced widely differing approaches and strategies, some of which may be somewhat incompatible with one other. Current lesbian and gay political organizations in Argentina can be divided into three broad categories: (1) assimilationist organizations, which favor integration into the heterosexual "mainstream," arguing that prejudice (homophobia) alone keeps them apart; (2) civil-rights-based associations, which mainly advocate legal protection for sexual minorities; and (3) radical groups, which prefer to question the nature of sexual identity.[11]

ASSIMILATIONIST ORGANIZATIONS

Assimilationist organizations like the CHA from the mid-1980s to 1997 and SIGLA seek integration into mainstream Argentinean society. They prefer to present gay men and lesbians as being similar to everyone else, showing no such visible sign of difference as gender nonconformity in clothing or behavior. (In contrast, the FLH considered effeminacy in gay men and masculinity in lesbians positively subversive.) Assimilationists decry the demonization of and discrimination against gays and lesbians, taking measures that include initiating court cases. Whereas the FLH believed in sexual liberation and the creation of a new order, these groups seek recognition. Their activists accept the current construction of sexual categories. For them, fighting for lesbian and gay rights is part of a larger struggle to give civil society more autonomy from the state. In order to "normalize" homosexuality, they sometimes cooperate more with human rights organizations and sometimes even the government than with other lesbian and gay groups. While president of the CHA (1986-1997), Alejandro Zalazar was employed in the area of human rights with the Ministry of the Interior. Given the ministry's responsibility for the police, among other things, both his and the CHA's credibility were severely compromised as a result. In general, assimilationist groups are less likely to accept bisexuality, since that would weaken assumptions that people are either homo- or heterosexual (Udis-Kessler, 1996). They

also tend to avoid association with transgendered people, reluctant to embrace their clear differences with the mainstream in terms of appearance and gender identity and sometimes going so far as to argue that the transgendered do not have a politics (*NX*, 1996: 28).[12]

CIVIL RIGHTS–BASED GROUPS

As do assimilationists, civil rights–oriented groups seek to "normalize" homosexuality, but they adopt a different-but-equal approach rather than a strategy predicated on sameness. Gays DC was founded in 1991 to work for gays and lesbians' civil (not human) rights, thus situating the struggle in civil society instead of in opposition to the state. Its motto, "Our struggle originates in the desire for all types of freedom,"[13] also illustrated a strategy of forging links with other communities. While it lasted (it dissolved in late 1996 after the death of its main activist), Gays DC provided members of "sexual minorities" and HIV-positive individuals with legal aid in cases of concrete discrimination and arrest. It also campaigned for equal rights, including marriage and adoption, and led the campaign for protection under the new Buenos Aires municipal charter. It sought the repeal of discriminatory legislation, the nondiscriminatory application of existing laws, and the passage of new measures to protect lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals from discrimination. In practice, its strategy combined casework, lobbying, and demonstrations to make its case. The issue of visibility, also one of the objectives of Lesbianas a la Vista (Lesbians on Sight), provides a justification for the attention drawn to this community's requirements, ensuring that they are present on the public agenda. In Argentina, where being open about one's sexuality is in many ways a risk, few gay men and lesbians are publicly out. For those who are, visibility is also a means of modifying attitudes and fighting discrimination, focused on civil society. By speaking of "sexual minorities," this strategy adopts and updates the CHA's early attempt to build bridges among those who suffered from repression under military rule. Rather than mention "human rights," a term that has lost its sway in Argentina, the civil-rights activist groups attempt to relate different disadvantaged positions (none more stigmatized than homosexuality and transgenderism), direct attention away from the nature of difference, and emphasize discrimination.

While much of the literature tends to present social movements as cases of society versus the state, the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement demonstrates a more ambiguous relationship. Members of civil-rights groups normally operate in ad hoc coalitions, seeking to limit the state's reach into the

private sphere while working with the state to enact new legal guarantees and mechanisms to ensure equal protection under the law. Some gay groups place much importance on recognition by the state (as in the case of the CHA's long fight for legal status), and many want to secure equal treatment in accordance with liberal democratic principles. The movement as a whole, however, is vehemently opposed to the state's repressive capacity. In fact, the 1995 pride march's theme was "Discrimination condemns us, the police kill us, we're still standing."[14] By choosing a civil-rights approach, they are deliberately favoring "legal reform, political access, visibility, and legitimation over the long-term goals of cultural acceptance, social transformation, understanding, and liberation." As the U.S. lesbian activist Urvashi Vaid (1995: 106, 179) argues, "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."

Any campaign based on visibility requires a positive relationship with the news media. If it is not publicized, a demonstration has very little impact. The media can send images and ideas to millions of people. Argentinean activists have been very adroit at ensuring media coverage of their events through good personal relations with journalists and the use of creative visual imagery. They keep the ear of influential institutions and individuals by not using violence or being seen as too radical. They would therefore agree that effectiveness requires "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" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996: 344).

RADICAL GROUPS

Radical groups such as the University of Buenos Aires's Colectivo Eros (Eros Collective) and the now defunct Grupo de Jóvenes Gays y Lesbianas "Construyendo Nuestra Sexualidad" ("Building Our Sexuality" Gay and Lesbian Youth Group) can be characterized primarily by their professed rejection of the system. These groups are mixed male/female and function mainly internally. Though both have taken part in larger political actions, the collective functions principally around issues and activities relating to the university. The youth group's main goal was to provide a space for young people to deal with their sexuality.

These groups reject the commonly accepted notion that sexuality is fixed as either hetero or homo (or even residually bi). Instead, they apparently

adopt a more social-constructivist approach to sexuality, seeing sexual orientation as a continuum on which individuals can move over time. As intellectual inheritors of the FLH, they place renewed importance on the goal of gay and sexual liberation. Like the FLH, they value marginality, emphasizing that the rights-based discourse does not accord any value to difference. These activists are critical of what they term the "mainstream movement" for making short-term concessions in exchange for tolerance rather than adopting a longer-term perspective. They strongly disagree with some assimilationist groups' strategies, sometimes even considering them worse enemies than the police because, as insiders, they can do more harm (Julio Talavera, interview, Buenos Aires, June 14, 1996). The radical groups see commonalities among oppressed groups but also links among social problems under capitalism—neoliberal policies, high unemployment, poverty, alienation, anomie, discrimination, and so forth. For instance, they do not wish to separate the issue of AIDS from the health care and education systems, both of which are suffering gravely from current economic policies. The ultimate goal of these groups is not merely to achieve lesbian and gay equality but to transform society—to liberate the human spirit.

These groups, however, have difficulty in identifying concrete measures to be taken. Furthermore, their wide-ranging goals cause resources to be spread thinly and can cause internal conflict over priorities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996: 15). Nonetheless, they do count some concrete achievements, such as the collective's institutionalizing a "queer" studies center at the university in 1997. Otherwise, to my knowledge, these groups have not yet translated their analysis into activities that differ significantly from other groups'.

TRANSCENDING IDENTITY?

Many new groups were established during the 1990s, aided by the increase in lesbian and gay visibility, and assumed roles that the CHA and later groups did not adopt. Some were born of internal splintering, others of separate lesbian organizing. Rather suddenly in 1995, many of these groups started to collaborate as a result of a number of new developments: the inclusion of issues relating to the transgendered, person-to-person contacts between groups, internal self-confidence, a newfound spirit of compromise, and international examples. Surprisingly, AIDS played little or no direct coalition-building role, despite the fact that about three-quarters of the cases of HIV infection were the result of homosexual contact—though this could

be an underlying motivating factor. Nonetheless, visions of unity had vanished by late 1996 as ideological differences, based in opposing strategies and views of identity, reemerged.

The radical goal of universally abolishing sexual orientation categories would end oppression but also erase the activists' identity. This is all but impossible to imagine, since "fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis of political power" (Gamson, 1995: 391). But the Argentinean lesbian and gay movement, by including transgendered people, made an important move toward weakening the rigid, essentialized identity of lesbian or gay. The homo/hetero binary was further destabilized in June 1996, when for the first time bisexuality was addressed. The issue was forced when a male and a female activist became romantically involved. Some lesbians argued that the woman could no longer speak on behalf of lesbians. Later that year, however, a number of groups resolved to include bisexuals when listing the categories of "sexual minorities" (Sardá, 1996a).

Except for the assimilationists, the Argentinean movement is increasingly recognizing (sometimes less than wholeheartedly) multiple categories of identity. Still, it is not enough to embrace "the postmodern celebration of diversity" (B. Epstein, 1990: 58). Difference can be seen as desirable, converted into an asset: "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"[15] (S. Epstein, 1987: 99). A middle ground can be found between assimilation and isolation, one in which diversity is harnessed as a strength. Failing that, social movements lose their potential for wider social transformation.

Talk among lesbians and gay men of a "global community" is deceptive, for it ignores differences in power based on local conditions and subject positionings such as class, gender, and race/ethnicity. In Argentina and elsewhere, individual activists and the movement in general will have to recognize 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" (Plotke, 1990: 94). By reducing people's identity to one solitary defining marker, identity politics can only come up against natural limits. In their desire to work with groups outside the lesbian and gay community, assimilationist organizations to some extent reject identity politics. However, their strategy is one of denying rather than valuing difference. Instead of abandoning sexual orientation as an identifier, it would be possible to surpass it, for example, arguing for a right to "sexual dissent" (Duggan, 1995).

CONCLUSION AND A LOOK AHEAD

In many ways, lesbian and gay movements epitomize the "new paradigm of politics": their actors value "personal autonomy and identity" and seek civil equality instead of organizing around socioeconomic interests and pursuing the redistribution of wealth or the conquest of political power. (Some other demands are monetary/material, for instance, partner benefits such as pensions or insurance.) In addition, these groups are usually informal, spontaneous, with a low degree of horizontal and vertical differentiation—quite distinct from the formal, large-scale representative organizations that partake in pluralist or corporatist interest intermediation under the "old paradigm" (Offe, 1985: 832).

To sum up my argument, I contend that the emergence of lesbian and gay activism in Argentina rested on the earlier creation and diffusion (through national and international opportunity structures) of lesbian and gay identities. The FLH's formation depended in larger part on a global and local protest cycle and the diffusion of ideas than on new local circumstances. Its demise, though, resulted from domestic conditions alone: a rapid surge in violent repression and the military coup of 1976 constituted insurmountable new constraints. The foundation of the CHA in 1984 and the emergence of the lesbian and gay movement were clearly results of political liberalization, which provided activists with three key elements. First, new opportunities (for example, access to the media and the possibility of holding peaceful demonstrations) allowed them to voice their opposition to the repression and discrimination that they unexpectedly still experienced under democratic rule. Second, a new discourse, based on human rights, enabled them to build bridges with other groups that had opposed the dictatorship. Third, greater contact with international support and models of political organizing facilitated and inspired their efforts. The growth in the number of groups after 1990 can be explained by increased visibility, fractures within the CHA over focus and ideology, and the formation of separate lesbian organizations. Each in its own way, lesbian and gay groups have sought to benefit from these new opportunities and create additional ones.

Without a closer look at identity, this analytical approach is only partial. It is impossible to comprehend the differences among lesbian and gay groups, the potential for collaboration, the nature of the dynamics, and future prospects without examining their conceptions of identity. When studying lesbian and gay movements, one should not conceive of them as one might other so-called new social movements. For movements based on race and ethnicity, for example, identity is usually transmitted and reinforced at home, in the

family or the neighborhood, or based on physical and/or cultural attributes. In contrast, lesbians and gay men's identity results from a historically constructed transgressive sexual desire that has become a basic component of personal definition. One cannot conceptualize this as a mere subculture or as one would the political identification of pacifists, for example. Analyzing the identity of lesbians and gay men provides a crucial means for understanding a complex and dynamic movement that the political-opportunity-structures approach cannot sufficiently explain on its own.

Given the incessant friction within a very diverse community and the often incompatible strategies and objectives that various groups adopt, it is likely that—at least in the short run—they will continue to collaborate on immediate issues and actions without becoming any more unified. Nonetheless, they are slowly eroding rigid boundaries by including bisexuals and transgendered people under the same umbrella as lesbians and gay men. This might presage a weaker emphasis on issues geared to a particular community and a greater focus on issues that concern a broader and more loosely defined group of people who are not afforded equal opportunities (moving beyond the confines of sexual orientation).

What might be the best strategy for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement to achieve its objectives? The answer depends to a great extent on how those objectives are identified. The major goal of assimilationists—the integration of gay men and lesbians into the "mainstream"—would necessitate abandoning the discourse of difference. Considering the strength of identity and prejudice, this does not seem likely to succeed, nor do these groups' strategies and activities effectively promote that goal.

Strategies organized around civil rights have proven reasonably effective in Buenos Aires, but the rest of the country is more resistant to change. Without the possibility of ever being in a majority, lesbians and gay men will require alliances with actors who are not defined by their sexual orientation in order to achieve more fundamental change, including in the cultural sphere. This will require rising above identity politics and could involve reduced cooperation with assimilationist lesbian and gay activists, who prefer acceptance to working for more basic social change.

One writer (Drucker, 1996: 101) sees the key to lesbian and gay liberation in an alliance with a unified left that supports oppressed people's self-organization. This strategy, however, is not particularly well suited to Argentina, given the left's current weakness and its historical distance from lesbian and gay concerns. The search for allies in social change should include a range of social movements, especially those that share a broader

interpretation of contemporary problems. In the past, some Mothers of the Disappeared (Madres de Plaza de Mayo) have symbolically participated in a few lesbian, gay, and transgender demonstrations. Some contact has recently been made with trade unions, whose activism has been very important historically in Argentina. They would make excellent partners for change, notably in the achievement of benefits for same-sex partners of members. Nonetheless, the economic situation in Argentina is extremely precarious. Since the early 1990s, social movements have been reduced to a more defensive position, fighting to retain what they have achieved since democratization rather than to obtain new concessions. Large-scale transformation might not occur anytime soon, but the lesbian and gay movement in Argentina is accumulating many small-scale victories along the way.

NOTES

1. Though Hanspeter Kriesi's chapter titled "The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context" does discuss the existence of a gay "collective identity," it does not distinguish it from other "subcultural movements."

2. My study focuses mainly on lesbian and gay activism, though I occasionally include a discussion of transgender issues. I use the term "transgendered" to refer to individuals called *travestis* and *transexuales* in Argentina. The terminology can appear confusing, since Argentineans use the term *travesti* to denote not a transvestite, cross-dresser, or drag queen (called *transformista*) but what is usually known in North America as a "pre-op" transsexual. In Argentina, however, the term *transexual* is used solely to refer to someone who has undergone genital reassignment surgery. I also raise the issue of bisexuality when relevant, though it has only recently started to be discussed as part of the movement. I prefer not to use the term "queer" because it is not an integral part of the movement's discourse; in fact, it is disliked by many activists because it brackets important differences within a very diverse community of nonheterosexuals.

3. It is difficult to determine whether Homosexual Liberation Front (FLH) members were targeted because they were members of the organization, simply because they were gay or lesbian, because they were leftist activists, or for a combination of these reasons. For more information on the FLH, see Perlongher (1985) and Green (1994).

4. For example, the police had repeatedly threatened Mocha Celis, a 34-year-old *travesti* prostitute. On August 18, 1996, she was seen getting into a police vehicle. Later that night she was found lying on the street, bleeding. She had been shot twice in the penis and died soon after. The police reported no leads on the murder (Sardá, 1996b).

5. All translations are my own. The original text reads "CON DISCRIMINACIÓN Y REPRESIÓN NO HAY DEMOCRACIA. . . . No existirá democracia verdadera si la sociedad permite la subsistencia de los sectores marginados y de los diversos métodos de represión aún vigentes" and refers to "personas que . . . nos preocupamos por la realidad nacional y transitamos junto a Ud. los duros años de la dictadura."

6. In Spanish: "El libre ejercicio de la sexualidad es un derecho humano."

7. The International Lesbian and Gay Association, the (U.S.) National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations participated in this campaign to embarrass Menem publicly (Julian, 1991: 50-51). As a result, he issued a presidential decree to legalize the Argentinean Homosexual Community (CHA).

8. Stonewall symbolically marks the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the United States.

9. In the original: "No hay que liberar al homosexual, hay que liberar lo homosexual de cada persona."

10. The original quotes are "Soy orgulloso de ser puto" and "Tenemos nuestra propia historia, santos y mártires."

11. I have omitted from my typology of political groups archival organizations (such as the Biblioteca Gay-Lésbica [Gay and Lesbian Library] and Escrita en el Cuerpo [Written on the Body]), whose primary function is to collect documentation for public access; religious groups (such as the Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana [Metropolitan Community Church]), which provide for the spiritual needs of the community; research organizations (for example, Grupo ISIS), which are more interested in scientific and social-scientific issues surrounding homosexuality; and sports groups (such as DAG). Membership in these types of groups does not preclude 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 now-dissolved Madres Lesbianas (Lesbian Mothers). These groups provide a women-only space for discussion and analysis, personal growth, and cultural expression. Their strategies involve reaching greater self-awareness, consciousness, and empowerment through women- and lesbian-only activities, beyond 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, such as the Asociación de Travestis Argentinas (Association of Argentinean Transvestites), Travestis Unidas (United Transvestites), the Organización de Travestis y Transexuales Argentinas (Organization of Argentinean Transvestites and Transsexuals), and the Asociación por la Lucha de la Identidad de las Travestis (Association for the Struggle for Transvestites' Identity) 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. Since the lesbian and gay movement itself is concentrated in the Buenos Aires area, that is where I focus my attention, though some groups, notably the Colectivo Arco-Iris in Rosario, have formed outside the capital, including most recently in Jujuy, Lobos, Neuquén, and Mar del Plata (where the church is more influential and people tend to be more socially conservative).

12. Nonetheless, the CHA appointed a transsexual to its executive in April 1996. She resigned in frustration before the end of the year (Lohanna Berkins, interview, Buenos Aires, February 6, 1997).

13. In Spanish: "En el origen de nuestra lucha está el deseo de todas las libertades."

14. Originally: "La discriminación nos condena, la policía nos mata, seguimos de pie."

15. 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."

REFERENCES

Cohen, Jean
1985 "Strategy or identity: new theoretical paradigms and contemporary social movements." *Social Research* 59: 663-717.

Drucker, Peter
1996 " 'In the tropics there is no sin': sexuality and gay-lesbian movements in the Third World." *New Left Review* 218: 75-101.

Duggan, Lisa
1995 "Queering the state," in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (eds.), *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Epstein, Barbara
1990 "Rethinking social movement theory." *Socialist Review* 20: 35-65.

Epstein, Steven
1987 "Gay politics, ethnic identity: the limits of social constructionism." *Socialist Review* 17: 9-54.

Gamson, Joshua
1995 "Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma." *Social Problems* 42: 390-407.

Gays por los Derechos Civiles
1995 *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*. 3d edition. Buenos Aires.

Green, James N.
1994 "Feathers and fists: a comparative analysis of the Argentine and Brazilian gay rights movements of the 1970s." Paper presented at the 17th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, March 10.

Jáuregui, Carlos Luis
1987 *La homosexualidad en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tarso.

Julian, Robert
1991 "A decisive time for Argentine gays." *The Advocate*, December 17, 50-51.

MacRae, Edward
1992 "Homosexual identities in transitional Brazilian politics," in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Álvarez (eds.), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy.* Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press. *NX*
1996 "Al enemigo no lo vamos a vencer nunca" (interview with Rafael Freda). *NX* 3.

McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Meyer N. Zald (eds.)
1996 *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Offe, Claus
1985 "New social movements: challenging the boundaries of international politics." *Social Research* 52: 817-868.

Perlongher, Néstor
1985 "Una historia del FLH," in Zelmar Acevedo (ed.), *Homosexualidad: Hacia la destrucción de los mitos*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sur.

Plotke, David
1990 "What's so new about new social movements?" *Socialist Review* 20: 81-102.

Robinson, Eugene
1991 "Argentina's gays battle attitudes." *Washington Post*, December 12.
Sardá, Alejandra
1996a "Argentina: 1996 Report." *Escrita en el Cuerpo*, servicio electrónico de noticias, December 18.
1996b "Travesti asesinada por la policía." *Escrita en el Cuerpo*, servicio electrónico de noticias, August 24.
Taylor, Verta and Nancy E. Whittier
1992 "Collective identity in social movement communities: lesbian feminist mobilization," in Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory.* New Haven: Yale University Press.
Udis-Kessler, Amanda
1996 "Present tense: biphobia as a crisis of meaning," in Donald Morton (ed.), *The Material Queer: A LesBiGay Cultural Studies Reader.* Boulder: Westview Press.
Vaid, Urvashi
1995 *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Anchor Books.
Warner, Michael
1993 "Introduction," in Michael Warner (ed.), *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.