Same-sex erotic behaviour is virtually universal in human societies. Few societies that have been carefully studied have been found to yield no evidence of same-sex eroticism. One survey found that in forty-nine out of the seventy-six societies it examined, some form of same-sex sexual behaviour was socially acceptable. But just what forms of sexuality exist and are considered acceptable varies enormously from one society to the next. Since the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, gay–lesbian movements have been rising up everywhere—including the Third World. Particularly since the 1980s, lesbians and gay men have declared their existence and formed organizations in Third World countries. Many of these people have shown extraordinary courage in being open about their lives and demanding their rights in the face of hatred and violence. Sometimes their struggle to live freely has even seemed to be directed against their own cultures and peoples, as when Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe banned the Zimbabwe Gay and Lesbian Association from an international book fair in August 1995, condemning gays as immoral and un-African.
Mugabe did an injustice to the burgeoning lesbian and gay communities and movements of southern Africa, as well as to the traditions of Zimbabwe’s majority Shona people. In general, those who repress Third World lesbians and gay men are one-sidedly selecting from and manipulating indigenous traditions. Anti-gay attitudes do not help to free Third World peoples from outside domination. Rather, they are a single aspect of their more general suffering under the ‘New World Order’ and the current global economic crisis. Newly arising gay and lesbian movements are an aspect of Third World peoples’ efforts to reclaim and redefine their nations and cultures.

There are various reasons why it is difficult to create an analysis and strategy for gay–lesbian liberation in the Third World. When compared to the history of homosexuality in the West, same-sex eroticism in the Third World has been little studied, and many of the studies which do exist, mostly dating from the past decade or so, have been by Europeans, North Americans and Australians. Much data, particularly from old ethnographic studies, is tainted by racial and sexual prejudice. Even present-day activists and scholars in the Third World have sometimes translated European and North American gay–lesbian writings rather than theorize from their own research and experience. Another problem is the enormous diversity of both Third World social formations and cultures, and of sexualities in different classes or milieux even within a single country. Virtually the only thing that unites Third World countries, after all, is domination by imperialism which has had a fairly strong unifying effect on their economic structures, a somewhat lesser impact on other aspects of their social structures, and perhaps the most diverse and varying effects on their cultures, including their sexuality.

Unique Histories—Unique Sexualities

The starting points for Third World same-sex eroticism were the very varied indigenous sexualities of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Many indigenous kinship-based cultures of Africa and the Americas had same-sex eroticism of a ‘transgenderal’ type, in which certain people took on the social roles and characteristics of a different gender. By contrast, Islamic West and Central Asia and North Africa, where slaves and city-dwellers were often cut off from their original communities and kin, had same-sex sexualities that were largely age- and class-defined: male youths and slaves in these cultures sometimes took on ‘passive’, ‘feminine’ sexual roles. In the past five centuries, however, Third World sexual cultures have been overlaid by European and North American conquest and domination. Indigenous sexualities have often been suppressed or reshaped; different European and North American sexualities have been imposed or imported; and new, unique sexualities have emerged.

1 Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, New York 1951, p. 130.
2 Thanks to Christopher Beck, Arthur Bruls, Ken Davis, David Fernbach, Anne Finger, Jamie Gough, James Green, Salah Jaber, Gary Kinsman, Vibhuti Patel, Tom Patterson and the students of the 1993 IIRE Third World School for encouragement, help in finding sources, criticisms and suggestions. Thanks also to the staff of the Documentatie Centrum Homostudies, Amsterdam. Since this is very much a ‘work in progress’, comments are particularly welcome. Please send them c/o IIRE, Willemsparkweg 202, 1071 HW Amsterdam, Netherlands.
Two forms of same-sex eroticism that developed in Europe, North America and Australasia from the fourteenth century onwards, and which can be termed ‘commodified transgenderal’ sexuality and ‘reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality’, were different from any of the Third World’s indigenous sexualities. European commodified transgenderal sexuality, which was notably brought to Latin America by the Spanish and Portuguese from the fifteenth century onwards, resembled traditional, kinship-based transgenderal sexuality in that it involved certain people taking on social roles and characteristics of another gender. But it differed from any traditional transgenderal sexuality in that it was largely urban, largely detached from rather than integrated into traditional kinship networks, more or less associated with prostitution for money rather than any kind of socially sanctioned marriage, and at odds with instead of sanctioned by the dominant religion. This type of sexuality put down deep roots in Latin America. Aspects of it seem to have been taken on by indigenous Southeast Asian transgenderal sexualities.

Reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality arose only in the nineteenth century. As it spread, lesbians and gay men acquired identities and formed communities that were more sharply demarcated from a majority that was now, for the first time, explicitly defined as ‘heterosexual’. This shift also fostered replacement of the transgenderal pattern of sexuality, polarized between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ partners, with a more equitable pattern. Forms of reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality have arisen later and taken different forms in the Third World than in Europe, North America and Australasia, for several reasons: later and more limited industrialization; later entry of women into the paid labour force; greater strength of family structures due in part to less developed welfare states; and poverty, which limits most Third World lesbians’ and gay men’s participation to a gay ghetto founded on consumption. Yet gay–lesbian communities have nonetheless grown up in the Third World, more and more quickly in recent decades. While European or North American influence may at times have facilitated the emergence of Third World gay–lesbian communities, the process of capitalist development inside Third World countries has been at least as important. If anything, Third World dependence on imperialist economies has helped to delay development of the material basis for Third World gay–lesbian communities.3

I. Indigenous Sexualities of the Third World

Given the enormous diversity of indigenous Third World sexualities, including same-sex eroticism, no real overview is possible here. This article cannot do justice to egalitarian forms of same-sex eroticism in some gathering-and-hunting cultures, for example, or to the ‘transgenerational’ sexuality between adolescent and adult males that anthropologists have described in some African, Amazonian, Melanesian and Australian

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3 This study thus dissents from Dennis Altman’s conclusion that even where ‘a strong homosexual tradition predates the Western impact’, it is ‘Westernization’ that ‘introduces … the idea of a homosexual identity’. The Homosexualization of America. The Americanization of the Homosexual, New York 1982, p. 51.
aboriginal societies. It is possible, though, to make some general points and focus on a few examples, particularly on indigenous forms which have been important in one way or another to later sexual development in the Third World.

If and when same-sex love has been tolerated in a society, it has had to adapt to and be ideologically justified in terms of the society’s gender and kinship systems. Kinship was particularly important and constraining in many pre-class societies in which the family was an important production unit and in which the division of labour was based largely upon gender. Many pre-class societies had extraordinarily elaborate marriage rules and clan structures. A wide range of same-sex sexualities have fitted into such kinship-based cultures. Often same-sex eroticism has been shaped into some quasi-kinship category, particularly through forms of ‘transgenderal’ sexuality, in which people were assigned social genders different from those we would consider their biological sex. Some forms of transgenderal sexuality have played an important role in shaping contemporary Third World same-sex eroticism.

Berdaches and Eunuchs

Transgenderal people, who in some magical way were given the social roles and attributes of a different gender, often played special military and/or social roles in indigenous cultures. Very often the transformation of gender and sexual practices went together: the range even of transgenderal sexualities has been extraordinarily wide. In some cultures transgenderal people have simply been reassigned from masculine to feminine or vice versa; in other cultures transgenderal males and females have been defined as a third or even fourth gender; in still others they have been defined as non-gendered. Transgenderal males in different societies could be seen as the ‘wives’ of other men, or as more or less honoured prostitutes, or as asexual. Although the sexual division of labour was often crucial to pre-class societies, in some there was little or no hierarchical difference between men and women; thus transgenderal people did not necessarily lose status through their transformation. On the contrary, they sometimes enjoyed great prestige as healers, conciliators or bearers of knowledge.

But male domination in many societies, even pre-class societies, has implications for sexuality. Lower status for women turns male-to-female transgenderalism into a degradation and female-to-male transgenderalism into an unacceptable escape from female status. At the same time, by segregating women from men in order to keep them from power, from activities restricted to men, and from men other than their fathers, husbands or masters, some male-dominated societies have tended to promote female bonding. This female bonding, including sexual activity,

has the potential in male-dominated societies to be felt or seen as a form of women’s resistance, ‘both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life’. Many or most of the practices and institutions that enable men to oppress women can also serve specifically to repress lesbianism: ‘men’s ability to deny women sexuality or force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement’; as is well known, such repression extends even to clitoridectomy in some parts of the Islamic world and the burning of widows in India.\(^6\)

Transgenderal sexuality was particularly suited to cultures centred about the family and the village and was often enshrined in traditional religion. Transgenderal people in indigenous American cultures were often shamans, known as ‘berdaches’. The transgenderal people still common today in much of Indonesia—called, among other things, ‘waria’—were also apparently associated with androgynous deities before Islam spread through the region in the fifteenth century. Waria are still shamans in non-Muslim areas of Borneo and central Sulawesi today, while in eastern Java wizards (waroks) take same-sex teenage spouses. In southern Sulawesi waria still guard court regalia. Unlike Western transvestites, ‘waria are waria all day long.’ Transgenderal shamans of a similar type were reported in the Philippines in Spanish accounts from the beginning of their conquest in 1589 and apparently existed there at least until 1738.\(^7\)

Another form of transgenderal sexuality existed in the ancient Dahomeyan and Yoruba cultures of West Africa, whose religions included belief in possession by deities of a different gender. A similar cult existed among the Hausa of present-day Nigeria before their conversion to Islam. We will return to this example because of the way it has survived, at least partially, among African communities in the Americas. Religious transgenderalism also existed among southern African peoples which had sangomas or ‘rain queens’. Among the Shona of present-day Zimbabwe, same-sex eroticism was traditionally associated with witchcraft—pace Robert Mugabe.\(^8\)

Transgenderal sexuality, most common in societies prior to the formation of states, was sometimes suppressed as states emerged in the Americas and Africa. For example, the Incas suppressed it after conquering the coastal people of Chimu, who left a record in their pottery of their interest in sex between males. There is also evidence that it existed among some indigenous Mexican peoples, particularly in Juchitán in


Oaxaca, in Michoacán, and among the Huastecos and Totonacos of Veracruz and Puebla. Intolerance of gender nonconformity and transgender sexuality may have become more prevalent in ancient Mexico with the rise of the Aztec empire, whose culture stressed militarism and rigid gender roles. Aztec and Inca intolerance might have reflected pressure to replace kinship- and village-based social relations with structures based more upon class and state. It might also have been an assertion of superiority over conquered peoples among whom transgenderal sexuality had been more common, and indeed it may still be reflected in the treatment of Mexican and Andean lesbians and gay men today.

Transgenderal sexuality remained a strong tradition in South and Southeast Asia, perhaps because Hinduism preserved elements of earlier, kinship-based cultures even after the rise of centralized states. Indian cultural traditions are tolerant towards androgyne, as is evident from the androgynous character of major Hindu deities such as Siva. Imagery of same-sex love can be found on thousand-year-old Indian temples in Khajuraho and Konarek. The transition to class society in South Asia probably helped bring about the severe constriction of women’s public life now characteristic of Hinduism, and also probably lowered the status of transgenderal people. Nonetheless, when compared to other cultures, South Asian culture still seems not to strongly associate masculinity with breaking free from the mother and with machismo.

In any event, the rise of class society required fitting transgenderal people into a more elaborate division of labour and a more developed hierarchy. The Indian transgenderal hijra was traditionally conceived as a hermaphrodite—a person with both male and female sexual organs—from birth, though it is doubtful that most hijras were in fact born hermaphrodites. Those who were not were emasculated by other hijras, while those living as hijras but resisting emasculation faced disapproval and pressure. They have always dressed as women and lived together in groups under the direction of a hijra guru. They were supposed to be under the protection of the goddess Bahuchara Mata, and to have the power to bless or curse. Economically, they have functioned as paid performers at weddings and births, as shampooers, and to some extent as prostitutes: the fourth- or fifth-century Kama Sutra mentions eunuchs, among others, in its detailed instructions for oral sex (auparistaka).

A similar tradition existed in Thailand. The Thai word kathoey, which primarily means ‘hermaphrodite’, has also been used to describe trans-

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vestites and other men who take on 'feminine' roles. Thai Buddhist ethical literature contains only one prohibition relative to kathoey, interestingly enough, which is the prohibition of magic that would ‘make a kathoey...change back into a man or make a man change into a kathoey’. Thai traditions, which allowed married men to keep concubines and visit prostitutes, permitted kathoey to fill these roles as well. With the consolidation of a rigid class society, however, Buddhist authorities urged the nobility, supposedly further advanced on the road to enlightenment, to refrain from sexual excesses which included sex with males.\textsuperscript{12}

**Beloved Youths**

In class-based societies outside South and Southeast Asia, kinship-linked transgenderal sexuality seems to have been a relatively rare form of same-sex eroticism. Particularly in slave-based economies in which the lower class was torn apart from its kinship and community ties, age-defined or class-defined male–male sexuality was common. In these cultures males taking ‘feminine’ roles were supposed to be socially inferior to, or just younger than, the men who had sex with them. This was the most common form of same-sex eroticism in the Mayan empire, in the countries of Greek or Latin culture along the Mediterranean, in the Persian-Arab-Islamic world, and in the empires and kingdoms of East Asia.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite explicit condemnations of male–male sexuality, for example in the Koran, homoeroticism pervaded much of mediaeval Arabic love poetry, and appeared in such classics as *A Thousand and One Nights*. ‘It is probably fair to say that most pre-modern Arabic poetry is ostensibly homosexual’, one scholar notes, summing up the prevalent attitude with the phrase: ‘There is the sort of love men have for their wives, which is good but not passionate; and there is the sort of love men have for each other, which is passionate but not good.’ References to male–male sexuality in mediaeval Arabic sources fell fairly clearly into an age-defined pattern: when the beloved was not a youth between fifteen and twenty years old—such as a youth at court or a student in a Koranic school—he was almost always either a slave or an androgyne.\textsuperscript{14}

This kind of homoeroticism apparently spread with Arab-Persian-Islamic culture, for example into the Indian subcontinent, where it was celebrated by classical Urdu and Sufi poets. Love of boys was practised at

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\item Greenberg, *Construction of Homosexuality*, pp. 91, 164.
\end{itemize}
the court of the fifteenth-century Afghan ruler Huseyn Mirza as well as in nineteenth-century Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan. Babar, the first Moghul emperor of India, wrote love poems in the Islamic tradition to his beloved boy favourite Baburi, and there is evidence of other, similar relationships in aristocratic circles in eighteenth-century Delhi. Similar relationships are reported in Turkey and Albania. In East Africa alone, interestingly, did the higher status of women lead to the adaptation of the Islamic male–male pattern to lesbianism.\textsuperscript{15}

In Indonesia, on the other hand, the region's vast expanse allowed for a great variety of indigenous sexualities in different regions. Along with the most common transgenderal waria, and the transgenerational sexuality practised among the Papuans of western New Guinea, Islamic influence has been visible in relationships between adult and adolescent males in western Sumatra. Relationships between older and younger male students in Muslim boarding schools in central and eastern Java were also in evidence as early as the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} Pre-colonial India and Indonesia, along with pre-colonial Mexico and Peru, thus provide examples of complex combinations of indigenous sexual cultures. In India and Indonesia, older kinship-based transgenderal sexualities coexisted with age-defined sexuality linked to Islam. In Mexico and Peru, sexualities indigenous to one culture may have been decreasingly tolerated because of conquest by another.

Indigenous forms of sexuality survive into the modern Third World, but rarely in pure form. With the European conquest and domination of increasing areas of the Americas, Africa and Asia, these indigenous forms were combined with forms imposed or introduced by Europeans at different points during a 600-year process of sexual development in Europe and North America. Because the process overlapped with the European and North American impact on Third World societies and sexualities, indigenous Third World sexualities interacted with European and North American sexualities at various stages. In particular, the Third World has been influenced by a 'commodified transgenderal' sexuality that arose in late medieval and early modern Europe. The generalization of commodity production and exchange in Europe undermined sexuality based on feudal kinship hierarchies. Prostitution spread—mainly female, but also sometimes male—and covert communities of men sexually available to other men arose, in northern Italy as early as the fourteenth century, in France in the fifteenth century, and in England and Holland in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{17} Surrounded at first by feudal societies, later by capitalist societies recently emerged from feudalism, these men tended to model their sexual relationships on the hierarchies of the larger society, take on sexual and gender roles analogous to those assigned to women, and have sex with 'real men' more or less outside their communities.


\textsuperscript{16} Oetomo and Emond, \textit{Homosexuality in Indonesia}, pp. 7, 3–4.

This was the dominant pattern of same-sex eroticism among the Europeans who conquered most of the Americas, Asia and Africa from the sixteenth century onwards. Only in the twentieth century would another sexuality that first appeared in Europe—reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality—take root in the Third World.

Beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the wake of the Dutch, English, French and American revolutions, notions of love, desire and free choice became the basis first of bourgeois marriage, and then as industries grew and capitalism became dependent on mass consumption, of middle-class and later working-class family life. Even women won some freedom in their personal lives; even the gender of a sexual partner or companion became a possible choice and criterion of self-identification. ‘Homosexuality’ became for the first time in late-nineteenth-century Europe the domain of a specifically and systematically identified set of people which included not just transgenderal people but all those engaging in same-sex activity. Material preconditions for this change were large-scale, rapid urbanization—which multiplied the size of urban gay communities and loosened their members’ family ties—and available jobs at wages seen as decent. During the twentieth century, reciprocal sexual relationships between self-identified lesbian women or between self-identified gay men, in which ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles do not necessarily determine sexual identity, gradually became dominant in gay–lesbian communities in advanced capitalist countries, though the “‘homosexual” displaced the [transgenderal] “fairy” in middle-class culture several generations earlier than in working-class culture.”

Beginning in the 1890s, lesbians and gay men influenced by feminism or other radical ideologies organized politically, giving rise by the 1970s to demands for the abolition of the social categories of gender and of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘heterosexuality’. Despite lower incomes and thus more restricted possibilities for life outside the family, urbanization and social change in the Third World have also led to the emergence of gay–lesbian communities and movements there.

II. Combined and Uneven Development Of Sexualities

While patterns of First World sexual development have recurred in the Third World, they have never been exactly repeated, being combined with various indigenous sexualities. Particularly with the advent of classical imperialism in the late nineteenth century, there has also been a tendency for forms of sexuality brought by Europeans to develop somewhat differently in the Third World than they have in Europe, North America or Australasia. The range of sexualities that exists in the Third World today can only be understood as a product of this combined and uneven development.

In Latin America, for instance, where European domination occurred

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early, where indigenous peoples were subjugated or even in some regions exterminated, where European colonial settlement was widespread, and where the culture has continued to be open to European and North American influence, sexuality during the past five centuries has been particularly subject to this type of development. Naturally, imported sexualities have been most significant in areas of greatest European settlement such as the Southern Cone while indigenous sexualities have persisted most vigorously in Mesoamerica and the Andes. In much of Latin America, the two have coexisted and interacted. In South Asia, by contrast, ruled by the British for only two centuries, and Africa, most of which was formally ruled from Europe for less than a century, imported sexualities are relatively less important. However, economic subordination is a central fact of life for the entire Third World, and this has had a lasting impact on indigenous as well as imported sexual patterns. The idea of returning to a completely pre-colonial or non-Western sexuality is now everywhere utopian.

Since the forms and histories of European domination of the Third World have varied greatly, so have the forms of combined and uneven sexual development. We can sort out the wealth of material about same-sex eroticism in the Third World, according to a very rough schema, into five broad patterns, several of which have often coexisted in shaping the sexualities of particular countries and even of particular individuals. These five patterns, which we shall discuss in turn, are:

1) The suppression of indigenous same-sex eroticism where Third World sexual customs were simply wiped out along with its ways of life—and sometimes along with its inhabitants.

2) The adaptation of indigenous same-sex eroticism where sexualities survived and gradually took on new forms better adapted to the requirements of dependent capitalist development.

3) The imposition of same-sex eroticism on Third World people by outsiders, either through the coercion of conquest and enslavement or through economic and social pressures.

4) The persistence of commodified, underground transgenderal sexualities in the Third World because of under-development and the consequent lack of the material and social conditions for reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality.

5) Social and political repression of same-sex eroticism, as part of the process of the development of modern family structures in the Third World which has engendered, finally: gay–lesbian resistance to repression and the emergence of distinctive Third World gay–lesbian movements.

1. Exterminating Sodomites

Throughout much of the areas conquered by Europeans in the Americas, Asia and Africa, and especially in regions of intensive settler colonialism, the imposition of European rule was accompanied by the imposition of European sexual mores. The prohibition of certain indigenous sexual practices was part of a far-reaching process of making colonized societies serve their conquerors’ needs, just as the disintegration of kinship structures facilitated the establishment of exploitative forced or waged labour. Sometimes, though, such prohibitions were simply an expression of
Europeans’ moralism—and hypocrisy. On the one hand, the sexual customs of the conquered peoples were often repressed on the grounds that they were brutal, primitive, un-Christian or immoral. On the other hand, the overwhelming power of the conquerors over the conquered meant that they could impose new customs whose cruelty or coerciveness often exceeded what had preceded them.

The Christian puritanism of the Europeans often led them to repress central institutions of Third World kinship systems such as polygamy. Since societies without states, including those in most of North America and Australia, were particularly vulnerable to European conquest and domination, their same-sex sexualities—often of the transgenderal type—were most likely to disappear through subjugation, conversion and assimilation. The existence of same-sex eroticism among the indigenous peoples of the Americas was even used as a pretext by the Spanish for exterminating them or, at the very least, for conquering, dispossessing and converting them. The same pretext was used in North America, particularly during the US conquest of the West in 1880–1910. In Brazil at least one slave was accused before the Inquisition in 1591–93 of having brought the practice of ‘passive sodomy’ from the area of modern Angola or Zaire. The Portuguese also burned ‘sodomites’ in sixteenth-century Goa.19

2. The Persistence of Indigenous Sexualities

Usually, however, indigenous sexualities have not been completely wiped out by imperialism, particularly given Europeans’ failure or sometimes lack of interest in converting African and Asian colonized peoples to Christianity. Even in the Americas, where some brand of Christianity became the dominant religion almost everywhere, elements of the dominated peoples’ cultures, religions and sexualities showed remarkable resilience. Enslaved Africans transplanted to the Americas, for example, despite the suppression of their political and social structures and their very languages, retained elements of their original cultures, a fact that scholars have only recently acknowledged.

Some observers suggest that the tolerance for same-sex eroticism that exists in Haiti today might reflect the belief in possession by deities of a different gender in the voudun religion. Gay Haitians, condemned by the Haitian Catholic church, seek out the relative freedom of voudun celebrations and the annual Carnaval parades. The belief in cross-gender possession found in voudun, along with faith in androgynous deities, is found in the candomblé religion which originated around 1830 in Bahia, Brazil, many of whose inhabitants were, like Haiti’s, slaves brought from the ancient Dahomeyan kingdom of West Africa. In Cuba, santería, derived mainly from Yoruba religion, ‘was and still is a favoured form of gender transcendence for many Cuban homosexual men and lesbians.’20

All these forms of sexuality are survivals of indigenous West African

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19 Trevisan, Perverts in Paradise, p. 55; Greenberg, Construction of Homosexuality, p. 311.
transgenderal sexualities. Ironically, even as Europeans suppressed *berdache* among indigenous American peoples, others seem to have travelled to the Americas on the Europeans’ own slave ships.

To take another example, the survival of the indigenous, medieval male–male eroticism of the Arab–Islamic world is reflected in the fact that sex between males is reputed to be common in North Africa and the Middle East today, despite the virtual absence of gay communities. This is sometimes attributed to the great difficulty of premarital or extramarital sex between males and females in many Arab countries. One recent authority writes: ‘Pederasty between children or young people does not give rise to great indignation’; another adds that male–male eroticism ‘continues to fuel Maghrebian fantasies’. Popular Egyptian and other Arab male singers of the 1950s and 1960s still used the word ‘beloved’ in the masculine form, even when the songs ostensibly referred to females. Similar patterns seem to persist in Islamic countries such as Pakistan, where male prostitution is common in cities like Karachi and less policed than extramarital sex between males and females. Muslim Malays who settled in South Africa under Dutch rule are popularly believed to have originated *moffie* same-sex traditions there.\(^{21}\)

One pernicious way in which such indigenous forms of sexuality can be adapted to the modern world, in cultures where passive sexuality in men is traditionally stigmatized, is by raping male social inferiors, prisoners or enemies. Allegations of such rapes are usually impossible to check. At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for example, such charges circulated as rumours on both sides: that rich Kuwaiti men had raped—and killed—Arab immigrant boys, and that invading Iraqi soldiers had raped male Kuwaitis.\(^{22}\)

### 3. ‘In the Tropics There Is No Sin’

The other side of Europeans’ attempts to suppress indigenous sexualities in the Third World has been the imposition of coercive and inequitable forms of sexuality. In the great majority of cases they have been imposed by colonizing men on colonized women, yet occasionally, in a small minority of cases, on colonized men. The imposition of European same-sex sexuality, though contrary to the conquerors’ religions and official policies, has sometimes take blatant and brutal forms. Many such kinds of sexual activity flourished in American and African countries where European slave-holders and conquerors had almost boundless power over those they owned or ruled. Slave-owners could force their slaves into sexual submission or prostitution.\(^{23}\) Among the Portuguese and Dutch in Brazil, for example, it was said that—at least for white people—*infra equinoxialem nihil peccari*; in the tropics there is no sin.

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The abolition of slavery and the virtual disappearance of formal colonialism has ended most of these more blatant forms of sexual coercion. Yet the imposition of sexuality on Third World people by Europeans continues—and they are now joined by North Americans, Australasians and Japanese. The increased ease and lower cost of travel in recent decades have expanded the possibilities for ‘sex tourism’ from richer countries which is again overwhelmingly male–female but also sometimes male–male. Third World people who have ‘freely’ chosen to cater to this tourism have often submitted to the veiled coercion of poverty, although some of them may perceive it as giving them greater resources, greater freedom or both. While not all work in the sex trade has been outright prostitution, much of it has been.

Many Third World areas have become centres for sex tourism, sometimes particularly of male–male sex tourism. In those Third World cities that cater to this trade, its influence can be felt even by people who are not directly involved. The stigma associated with the sex trade probably varies in intensity depending on the indigenous sexualities that preceded it; in Thailand, for example, sex tourism has apparently led Thais to more readily associate transgenderal individuals with prostitution and corruption. Since katboeys seem to have traditionally been involved in more long-term or structured relationships, sex tourism seems to have brought a decline in their status. In Latin America, where pasivos were always stigmatized, it has probably not made as much difference. In the Maghreb, where the hegemonic assumption seems to be that foreign men’s Arab sex partners are either playing the active role, just going through a youthful phase, or both, the stigma may be less. In any event, people in Third World countries do not always experience the centres for sex tourism as entirely oppressive and demeaning. These milieus can also ‘provide a transition for local youth between the traditional restraints of the national culture and the attractions of the West’. In Thailand, given traditional hierarchies and conformity, relationships with foreigners ‘relieve Thai homosexuals of many social pressures’. Crackdowns on these milieus which are implemented without democratic consultation, as in post-revolutionary Havana or Ho Chi Minh City, can be experienced as being even more oppressive than exploitation in the sex trade itself.

4. Transgenderal Undergrounds in the Third World

Third World people often think of the sexualities associated with sex tourism as something alien. Yet, as we have seen, even the sexualities that Third World people feel to be their own often bear little resemblance to those which existed before European conquest. In particular, commodified, covert forms of transgenderal sexuality have arisen in the Third World as urbanization has undermined traditional family structures, and have often persisted even after they have been largely supplanted in Europe by forms of reciprocal sexuality. This divergence is to be expected, given that all the factors that led to the rise of European

25 Altman, Homosexualization of America, p. 51; Jackson, Male Homosexuality in Thailand, p. 92.
transgenderal undergrounds (urbanization, commodification, the weakening of family ties and religious authority) and of reciprocal gay–lesbian sexuality (industrialization, women’s emancipation, an ideology of sexuality and love, a welfare state supplanting many family functions) have come later and less universally to the Third World.

Large-scale urbanization in Latin America late in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Southern Cone, fostered the growth of transgenderal undergrounds similar to those of Europe and North America. Such transgenderal communities appeared in Argentina not long after they did in the US—before the First World War in Buenos Aires—complete with the dress codes, slang and festivities that characterized them elsewhere. Since then, Latin America’s under-development has helped perpetuate similarly polarized gender systems and transgenderal patterns of sexuality. In Brazil, there is still ‘a very easy relationship between men sexually, as long as one of them is sexually active and the other sexually passive’. The popular terms in Spanish are ‘activo’ and ‘pasivo’. Or, in the cruder Brazilian phraseology, ‘The macho fucks the bicha without being reduced to the bicha’s status, much less being emotionally involved’. In pre-revolutionary Cuba the crude words for pasivo were loca (‘crazy woman’) or maricón; many small Cuban villages had a loca or maricón, whose lives were very different from those caught up in the sex trade of Havana. In Mexico today, one can still find men who not only see themselves as feminine, but are attracted only to men who are also sexually involved with women. One recent survey of Ecuadorian gay activists found that 96 per cent preferred sex with ‘straight’ men. In urban Latin America particularly, pasivos often dramatize their ‘feminine’ roles through transvestism.

European influence over Southeast Asia began early but proceeded slowly. While the Portuguese and Spanish settled and fortified strategic areas from the fifteenth century, and were followed by the Dutch, French and English, conquest of Indonesia and the Philippines was completed only several centuries later. Other countries, such as Thailand, were never formally conquered by Western powers, though of course they have been heavily influenced by them. As a result, traditional transgenderal sexualities—of Thai kathoys, Indonesian waria, and so on—have taken on more commodified forms without losing their traditional roots. The spread of transvestite beauty contests, common in much of contemporary Latin America but presumably not a tradition of ancient Southeast Asia, is one indication. Thai kathoys now gather for many annual beauty contests, which are a long-standing tradition. Moffies in the ‘Coloured’ community of South Africa’s Cape region have similar transgenderal features, including the tradition that the annual Cape Coon Carnival be led by a moffie; transgenderal skesanas have an analogous

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position in townships in the Johannesburg region, largely among men of Zulu origin, though the 1992 Johannesburg Lesbian–Gay Pride March was led not by skesanas but by their ‘male, non-gay’ injonga boyfriends! The Thai example is particularly complex. The tradition of kathoey clearly predates any contact with Europe yet Thailand’s incorporation into the world market began as early as the seventeenth century, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism proceeded slowly until the late nineteenth-century abolition of serfdom and beyond. The impact of social change on sexuality has been gradual. Formal polygamy only died out in Thailand in the early years of this century, while formal concubinage still exists. The Buddhist tradition that required of upper-class people a high standard of sexual restraint while being looser about lower-class sexual mores is also still influential. Next to the enduring strength of kathoey patterns, a gay identity linked to reciprocal sexuality has taken only a tenuous hold. The rapid rise of the sex trade since the 1970s has accelerated the formation of a gay community without marginalizing traditional sexualities despite the introduction of gay publications and international gay terms and trends into the kathoey world.

The spread of the sex trade among transgenderal people is another indication of a shift from traditional to commodified sexualities. In South and Southeast Asia in particular, the bulk of the sex trade—including the same-sex trade—serves the domestic market, not sex tourism. Estimates have put the number of young or ‘under-age’ prostitutes, female and male, at 800,000 in Thailand, 400,000 in India, 20,000 in the Philippines—more than half of them boys—and 10,000 in Sri Lanka.

Since their entry into the workforce and emergence from traditional dependence has occurred later, divergences between forms of sexuality in Third World and advanced capitalist countries affect women, and thus lesbians, in particular ways. Third World lesbian milieus are sometimes reminiscent of the old, polarized, ‘butch–femme’ patterns that were still strong in North America in the 1950s. In Mexico, lesbian ‘machas’ and ‘colonels’ have formal weddings with ‘femmes’—who often take care of children from previous heterosexual marriages, since early marriage is common. A similar, underground lesbian culture exists in the black South African township of Soweto. Sports is a common form of bonding among butch lesbians from Peru to India.


Visible Communities Emerge

Transgenderal forms sometimes seem to persist longer among working-class people, who are less likely to command the wages necessary to participate in a gay world separate from traditional family structures. Where gay ghettos do exist in the Third World, they are more likely to be middle-class preserves than in the First World; working-class lesbians and gays in the Third World can rarely afford to go to discos or fancy bars. In Indonesia, where ‘gay’ has become the most common word for same-sex eroticism in middle-class circles, the distinction between ‘gay’ and ‘waria’ is less clear among poorer people. In Peru, a group of soccer-playing, working-class lesbian *machas* who encountered middle-class lesbian feminists suspected their middle-class sisters of wanting to turn them into *femmes*. One Mexican study found gay student—presumably middle-class in origin or at least in aspiration—particularly likely to abandon gender polarization, with three-fourths rejecting *activo* or *pasivo* roles. In Brazil a reciprocal gay (*entendido*) identity began to grow up mainly among upper-class men as early as the 1950s and spread more broadly in the 1960s and 1970s. This class difference may decrease with a rise in either working-class living standards or gay consciousness. In any event, it by no means precludes working-class participation in growing gay–lesbian communities.

With or without a major shift from transgenderal to reciprocal sexuality, the rise of more visible gay–lesbian communities becomes possible wherever businesses catering to same-sex networks are established. Once such networks grow, it becomes more likely for a broad group, including transgenderal people, to spend more time in an emergent gay community and to begin to identify with it. Although the economic foundation for gay life is still weaker in most Third World countries than in Europe, North America, Australasia or Japan, ‘the market is now sufficiently developed in all but the very poorest Third World countries for gay people to exist.’ At least, the market is sufficiently developed in capitals and some other major cities, for gay–lesbian communities can be slow to spread to provincial centres, let alone the countryside. In Thailand the gay scene is incomparably more important in Bangkok, which has incomes over twice the national average and a population forty times larger than the next biggest city. In Turkey, with a level of economic development higher than the average in the Middle East, gay subcultures, virtually unique in the Islamic world, have grown up in the big cities—Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. Whether economic potential is

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translated into an actual gay–lesbian community depends on many cultural and ideological factors. Distinct communities may emerge more slowly, for example, where lesbians and gay men are camouflaged by widespread, public male and female bonding—such as Mexican *cuatismo*.\(^\text{34}\) Even a huge and open centre of same-sex activity like Bangkok does not become the site of a community until enough people think and act as a community.

5. ‘Modernization’ and Anti-Gay Bigotry

In the Third World, as in the early development of the advanced capitalist countries, the rise of a stronger state apparatus has made possible more thorough sexual repression. The attempt to create nuclear family structures, thought to be an important aspect of ‘modernization’, has often been a motive. Furthermore, global economic crises hit the Third World hardest, so popular impulses to find scapegoats can be strong. The greatest irony is the propensity of many Third World governments to associate same-sex eroticism with the resented West. AIDS has reinforced the tendency, which already existed in Third World countries, to associate same-sex sexuality with disease, corruption and imperialism. Anti-gay prejudice has helped ensure that transgenderal people are disproportionately illiterate, under-educated, poor and involved in crime. This, in a vicious circle, justifies further prejudice. Some Third World peoples associate same-sex sexuality with sex-segregated institutions such as prisons and migrant-labour compounds which spread with colonization.\(^\text{35}\)

In recent decades in many Third World countries virtually universal and invisible repression has given way to explicit, publicized and politicized repression. Prejudice has acquired greater force when governments or political movements have found it useful, shifting responsibility for a crisis onto minority groups or mobilizing the population in a controlled way. Anti-gay campaigns have been exploited by several different types of Third World regimes and movements: authoritarian populists; the fascist and quasi-fascist Right; religious fundamentalists; and latter-day Maoists. ‘Moral renovation’, for instance, was a theme of the Mexican regime’s anti-gay persecutions of the 1970s, when that regime had greater anti-imperialist pretensions than it does today. In 1988 the Aquino government in the Philippines backed a similar moral crusade which targeted gays among others.\(^\text{36}\)

Naturally, sexual repression has been even more vicious in countries where all popular movements are being repressed, as in the anti-gay campaigns of the Chilean junta between 1973 and 1989, and the killing and torture of gays under the Argentinian junta between 1976 and 1983. The Brazilian government rounded up and jailed 1,500 men in a drive against same-sex activity in São Paulo in 1979, and four thousand in 1980, helping to spark the rise of gay resistance. In Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and El Salvador, right-wing death squads have more

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\(^{34}\) Lumsden, *Homosexuality, Society and the State*, p. 32.


recently carried out ‘social clean-up’ murders, particularly of male prostitutes and transvestites. At least 328 men were killed in similar death-squad campaigns in Colombia between 1986 and 1990, often with the complicity of the army, while in Brazil at least 1,200 were killed over the course of a decade.\(^{37}\)

In the current global economic crisis, the popular hunger for scapegoats has intensified and has been seized upon by various political forces. In the upsurge of fundamentalist and communalist reaction and violence that has affected many countries, same-sex eroticism has often been among the targets. The fundamentalist regime in Iran, for example, ignoring ‘a homosexual tradition dating back thousands of years’, has attacked and even executed gay people on the grounds that they are ‘a product of Western imperialism’. AIDS has further increased anti-gay persecution based on religious belief. In Mexico it provoked an attack on gays by the Catholic hierarchy and the allied right-wing group Pro-Vida. It has uncovered or created a puritanical side even in relatively tolerant Buddhism, with raids in 1987 by Bangkok’s fundamentalist governor on ‘offensive’ publications.\(^{38}\) In Peru the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla movement has also been reported to execute people involved in same-sex relationships. However, lesbians and gay men in the Third World are themselves providing the best antidote to such actions, through the resistance movements which they have begun to build.

### III. The Rise of Gay–Lesbian Movements

Today gay–lesbian movements exist in at least fifty-two countries, including many countries of the Third World. Every Latin American country except Panama and Paraguay now has an organized gay–lesbian movement, many of them active since the mid-1980s. In Asia, gay–lesbian movements are known to exist in India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea; in Africa, in Egypt, Ghana, Liberia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Almost all push on despite a broad range of difficulties, from a serious shortage of funds or even office space to a complete lack of legal status.\(^{39}\) These movements are not imitating Western fashion, for the

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\(^{38}\) Altman, *Homosexualization of America*, p. 51; Lumsden, *Homosexuality, Society and the State*, p. 67; Jackson, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, pp. 272–3. This article cannot deal adequately with the AIDS epidemic, one of the worst manifestations of Third World under-development. 

sexualities on which they are based are often distinctive to the Third World. They are defending existing Third World communities against their rulers, and expressing the human needs of people who are deeply rooted in their own cultures and societies. At the same time they are, just as much as Europeans and North Americans, caught up in global economic and social developments.

The First Wave: Latin America

Where gay–lesbian communities have even the barest existence, founded on a certain level of urban and market development, organization is possible. The first Third World countries to have mass gay–lesbian movements were among the most urbanized: Argentina beginning in 1969, followed by Mexico in 1971 and Puerto Rico in 1974. Brazil had dozens of underground gay papers even earlier in the early 1960s. The rise of gay–lesbian movements was particularly rapid when it converged with broader resistance to dictatorships, as in Argentina in the wake of popular uprisings against the dictatorship in 1969 and 1971. In Brazil, a congress called in 1976 by the Union of Brazilian Homosexuals was banned by the dictatorship’s police. Only the rise of a strong popular movement against the dictatorship in the late 1970s, particularly the strike wave in 1978, made possible the spread of gay groups, the founding of a national gay newspaper, Lampião de Esquina, and in 1980 the first Brazilian Congress of Organized Homosexual Groups. Gays and lesbians cooperated closely and harmoniously with the rising black and women’s movements. Cooperation with the socialist Left was more controversial, due in part to the anti-gay attitudes of pro-Soviet and pro-Albanian groups and in part to some gay leaders’ blanket hostility to the Left; the issue caused a split in the gay–lesbian movement. But the new Workers Party (PT) worked well with the movement. Gays marched on May Day 1981 in a pro-PT contingent and PT candidates were elected with open gay–lesbian backing and explicitly pro-gay programmes. In one city, the PT municipal directorate and a local gay–lesbian group shared an office. Conversely, the triumph of dictatorships has sometimes meant the destruction of fledgling gay–lesbian papers—as in Brazil after the 1964 coup—and whole movements, as with the Argentinian Homosexual Liberation Front in 1976. Some of this group’s leaders fled to Brazil where they helped found the gay movement there later in the 1970s as the dictatorship slowly relinquished power.

In Mexico, the international student demonstrations of 1968 were echoed by strong protests against the regime. The first gay activism and consciousness-raising followed not long after in 1971. By the late 1970s there was a vibrant gay–lesbian movement, with thousands taking part in gay-pride marches. Lesbian and gay organizations such as Lambda, Oikabeth and the Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front (FHAR) grew rapidly. Gay–lesbian activism was closely associated with solidarity with

El Salvador and—more problematically—with Cuba. The growth of feminism in the 1970s was crucial for the foundation of the first Mexican lesbian group in 1977. By 1982 the gay–lesbian movement linked up with the Marxist Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), which ran several lesbian and gay leaders as candidates in the elections that year.42

Because less popular mobilization was involved in transitions from dictatorship to democracy in Latin American countries other than Brazil, the boost to gay–lesbian movements was not so marked. The groups that have re-emerged in Argentina and Uruguay since the fall of the dictatorships in 1983 have been embattled, particularly in Argentina because of the government’s refusal to grant legal recognition. The fact that liberalization coincided with economic hard times may also have been a factor. The movement was re-established in Chile with the founding of the Homosexual Liberation Movement (MOVILH) in 1992. Also in 1992, Salvadoran lesbians with roots in the FMLN and an ongoing left identity took advantage of their country’s partial liberalization to organize themselves.43 The Left’s prejudices have, however, often limited its convergence with gay–lesbian resistance. For example, in Argentina in 1973 right-wing posters linked the Marxist ERP to homosexuality and drug addiction, and the Left responded by chanting, ‘We’re not faggots, we’re not Junkies.’ One can only imagine how a gay or lesbian participant must have felt on hearing this chant. There were undoubtedly other examples of left bigotry in this period.44

In countries where gay–lesbian communities are young and economically precarious, poor economic conditions can also slow gay–lesbian organization. For example, hyper-inflation in Argentina in 1974–75 made economic survival a higher priority than activism for all but a small core of the formerly flourishing movement. Worsening economic conditions were also probably a factor when the movement went into decline in Mexico in 1982. Most lesbians and gay men, suffering from poverty, pervasive prejudice and increasingly AIDS, were not drawn to a very public, politicized—and internally divided—movement. When activists abandoned their political groups for activities in a lower key, oriented towards social service, they were in part responding to pressure from lesbians and gay men. Although marches and cultural events have continued to take place and some lesbian groups have continued with political work—the national lesbian feminist coordinating group had eight regional affiliates in 1991—there was virtually no gay male political work in Mexico at the beginning of the 1990s.45 The Brazilian movement went into a decline at about the same time as the Mexican, though it was not so precipitous, probably due to a similar combination of hard times and AIDS. A revival came later in the 1980s. Ten strong gay groups remained active early in 1992, and the movement was far more united in supporting the PT in

44 ‘Shrouded in Silence’ (1982), Coming Out, p. 75.
1994 than in the early 1980s. In Puerto Rico, gay political organizing largely gave way to AIDS services by the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{46}

Even in the midst of the global crisis, gay–lesbian organization in the Third World has continued to advance but, as new groups formed, beginning in the late 1980s, their character changed. After a decade in which Latin America was the continent for Third World gay–lesbian organizing, Asia emerged as another major area of activity. Even more important, lesbian groups have been more prominent than in the 1970s. Several factors may have contributed to this shift. Economically, women have increased their role outside the home relative to men, by moving, for example, into assembly plants in Southeast Asia and into the ‘informal sector’ in Latin America. Ideologically, as the Left retreated in the 1980s, feminism and the women’s movement proved more resilient. New lesbian-feminist groups have emerged in Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and India, sometimes provoking major discussions in feminist organizations such as the Forum Against Women’s Oppression in Bombay.

The most brutal factor in precipitating change has been AIDS, which killed a number of gay male leaders of the 1970s or turned their attention away from politics—at least as they used to define it. To the extent that gay men have been organizing in the Third World since the mid-1980s, AIDS and AIDS-inspired repression have been the most forceful stimuli. In Costa Rica, for example, the AIDS crisis and ensuing raids on gay bars, mandatory testing, and the murders of several gay men in 1987 provoked a wave of organizing and the establishment of the country’s first gay–lesbian organizations. AIDS has also prompted the formation of the first gay–lesbian organizations in Guatemala (1989) and Malaysia (1987); Action for AIDS in Singapore (founded 1989) and the Fraternity for AIDS Cessation in Thailand (founded the same year) were the first largely gay public organizations in their countries; and safer-sex workshops enabled the originally predominantly white Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (founded in 1990) to make contact with an informal black gay network.\textsuperscript{47}

Another recent breakthrough for gay–lesbian organizing took place in black townships in South Africa, in the wake of the 1976 Soweto uprising. The issue of gay–lesbian rights came to the fore in 1984 when one of several African National Congress members on trial for their lives, Simon Nkoli, was revealed to be gay. This provoked a split in the South African gay–lesbian movement. Anti-apartheid gay–lesbian groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) and the Organization for Lesbian and Gay Action (OLGA) were founded, and


in 1990 the United Democratic Front admitted OLGA as an affiliate. The ANC’s support for gay–lesbian rights is now reflected in the new South African constitution. Rapid change and cultural and class tensions led in 1992 to the formation of the new group Abigale, whose members saw themselves as more black and working-class than OLGA’s and worked closely with the ANC in Khayelitsha township near Cape Town. Even so, the rapid changes in South Africa continue to raise questions about the direction of both the ANC and the gay–lesbian movement.  

International Solidarity

It is clear that gay–lesbian liberation in the Third World is not an ‘export product of the imperialist countries’. The general rise of the Latin American Left in the 1970s and the threat of AIDS and AIDS-related repression since the 1980s have been at least as important as any European or North American influence. But it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the autonomous development of gay–lesbian communities from strong influences from European, North American and Australasian gay–lesbian communities. Nevertheless, regional networking among Third World movements has been at least as important.

For centuries, the direct influence of imperialist countries on Third World sexuality took the forms of repression and domination which still continue today. But the rise of working-class and new social movements have made another kind of influence possible: solidarity between movements in the advanced capitalist countries and movements in the Third World. This solidarity ‘piggybacks’ in an odd way on the strong cultural influence that imperialist cultures have on Third World cultures. Since 1969, developments in European or North American gay–lesbian movements have often had an extraordinarily rapid, if more or less diluted, influence on their Third World equivalents. The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and International Lesbian Information Secretariat (ILIS), both composed and run largely by lesbians and gay men in the advanced capitalist countries, have contributed to the growth of Third World movements by carrying out solidarity actions, sending materials and money, and ‘twinning’ richer and poorer groups. Yet sometimes their vision and solidarity have had limits, as when the 1985 ILGA conference in Toronto rejected a resolution supporting Third World national liberation movements.

Solidarity expressed through the international feminist movement has been significant for the development of Third World lesbian movements: for example, at the UN Women’s Decade Conference in Nairobi in 1985. Lesbians from ILIS began discussing the Nairobi conference in April 1984, formulated demands, brought four thousand pamphlets and five hundred magazines there, set up a lesbian stand, and held a lesbian caucus each day. The workshops they organized were packed, attracting women from 120 countries. Several times in these workshops a Kenyan woman got up to say, ‘In our country it does not exist’—and other Kenyan women

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would shout, ‘Yes it does! Yes it does!’ Kenyan lesbians thus gained an opportunity to make themselves visible they had not had before.

Over the years, though, interaction among Third World movements has become at least as important as connections to advanced capitalist countries. Regional gay–lesbian and women’s gatherings, particularly in Latin America and Asia, have become a key mechanism spurring gay–lesbian organizing. For isolated individuals or small groups in particular countries, the support of a large regional network has often been essential. The ILIS Geneva conference in 1986, following the 1985 Nairobi conference, was the first to have lesbians attending from five continents. It provided an occasion for six women to begin plans for an Asian Lesbian Network, which held its first conference in December 1990 in Bangkok. Asian gay conferences in 1986, 1988 and 1990 also helped consolidate the wave of Asian organizing. Several Latin American lesbian groups were founded in the wake of a lesbian workshop at the second Latin American Feminist Gathering in Lima in 1983, including a lesbian group in Chile. Together with the 1986 ILIS conference, the Lima Gathering provided the impetus for Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Gatherings in 1987, 1990 and 1992. Salvadoran lesbians credited the 1992 gathering in Managua with inspiring them to found their Salvadoran group. A gathering of Latin American gay–lesbian groups took place later in 1992. Gay–lesbian movements in the Third World have sometimes been spurred onwards by compatriots returning from advanced capitalist countries or helped by immigrants in North America or Europe who have organized in solidarity with them. The 1987 Latin American lesbian gathering was funded in part by a California gay–lesbian Latino group, for example, while the first two gay–lesbian South Asian organizations were founded in 1985–86 in the North American diaspora and spread back to India.

Gays and Revolution: Cuba

Although gay–lesbian movements leaned strongly toward socialism as they emerged in the Third World in the 1970s, Soviet and Chinese influence fuelled anti-gay prejudice on the Left. The Bolshevik regime’s inconsistently tolerant policies of the 1920s—decriminalizing same-sex sexual activity, publishing homoerotic literary works, supporting the


World League for Sexual Reform—had given way by 1934 to recriminalization and persecution,\(^{52}\) and the Chinese revolution had brought an unremittingly anti-lesbian and anti-gay regime to power. Communist and Maoist parties around the world propagated anti-gay attitudes, and many leftist currents in the Third World that were not pro-Soviet or Maoist unthinkingly took up the anti-gay tradition.

The Cuban revolution, given its importance for revolutionaries all over Latin America, has played a particularly negative role in associating the Left with the persecution of lesbians and gays. US imperialism played a role here, not only through pre-revolutionary sex tourism which reinforced anti-gay prejudice among Cuban revolutionaries, but through backing a counter-revolutionary fifth column in Cuba in the early 1960s, which ensured that ‘private space was invaded as never before’. The Soviet Union and Stalinist Popular Socialist Party also helped to fuel anti-gay attitudes. After a certain point, however, the Castro regime’s attacks on gays as counter-revolutionary became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even gay people who had backed the revolution found themselves pushed toward ties with the anti-Castro underground because it was one of the few places to escape the repression and isolation.\(^{53}\)

The height of the regime’s persecution came when gays were rounded up into the UMAP camps in 1965. Although these camps were closed in 1967, other anti-gay measures followed in the 1970s: lesbians and gay men were purged from teaching, delegations abroad, the foreign ministry and the medical profession. CP membership remains officially impossible for lesbians and gay men, although a play by openly gay CP member Senel Paz opened in Havana in 1992. A saying among Cuban lesbians and gay men today is reputedly, ‘Say nothing, do everything.’ Some observers report finding a substantial gay–lesbian community there,\(^{54}\) but the regime’s AIDS policy from the late 1980s of quarantining everyone who tests positive for the HIV virus—a policy that may prove wrong-headed from a public-health standpoint—has had a chilling effect. Even so, official educational materials about AIDS have adopted a neutral tone about homosexuality that was rare earlier.\(^{55}\)

### Gays and the Nicaraguan Revolution

Nicaragua, by contrast, provides a somewhat more positive example.

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\(^{53}\) Arguelles and Rich, ‘Homosexuality, Homophobia and Revolution’, *Hidden from History*, pp. 447–8. In *Gays under the Cuban Revolution*, Young concludes from the PSP’s role that anti-gay repression in revolutionary Cuba was due to ‘the external tradition of European Marxism’.


\(^{55}\) Reeder, ‘Cuba’, *XL*, vol. 1, no. 7 (1992), p. 17.
Pre-revolutionary Nicaragua was typical of Latin American patterns of sexuality in many ways. On the one hand, there was a transgenderal tradition of *locas* who did ‘women’s work’, expressed for example in the traditional annual parade of men in drag in the centre of national folklore, Masaya. On the other hand, US sex tourism—on a very small scale—and male prostitution existed in a few bars in Managua, an ‘immense, sprawling rural town’ with hardly any gay scene. Suspicion towards an apparently old-fashioned transgenderal sexuality in the Nicaraguan countryside and towards the sometimes exploitative sexuality found in the bars of Managua pushed the FSLN toward anti-gay attitudes, which were particularly in evidence during the Sandinista government’s first years. There was pressure while the FSLN was in office to avoid public discussion of same-sex eroticism or public self-identification by lesbian and gay FSLN militants. A gay–lesbian ‘group of reflection and action’ which was formed in 1985, including FSLN members and others doing military service, broke up under pressure from the interior ministry in 1987.

However, US anti-interventionists’ solidarity with the Nicaraguan revolution was clearly crucial to its survival, a fact that gave them influence on both the FSLN and Nicaraguan gays. A number of lesbians and gay men in the US managed to combine support for the revolution with insistence on their own visibility, for example by taking part in the gay–lesbian Victoria Mercado Brigade from San Francisco in 1984. Combined with the efforts of lesbian and gay Nicaraguan leftists, who took courage from the end of Somocista repression, Sandinista conflict with the Catholic hierarchy, and the new regime’s efforts to encourage women’s equality and independence, US gay–lesbian solidarity had an impact. The rise of a US movement against AIDS about the time that the disease appeared in Nicaragua created an opening for the fledgling gay–lesbian movement. In 1988 lesbians and gay men organized an AIDS collective with support from the ministry of health. In 1989 they marched openly as a contingent in the revolution’s tenth anniversary celebration.

Gay–lesbian activism continued after the rise to power of the US-backed, sexually traditionalist Chamorro government in 1990, despite repressive measures and the withdrawal of funding. The Sandinistas’ fall from power even created somewhat more freedom to debate differences inside the FSLN and question the imperatives of ‘national unity’. One lesbian FSLN activist said, ‘When we lost the election…that’s when I began to have a personal life.’ A lesbian feminist collective, Nosotras, formed in 1991. In June 1991 three hundred men and women came to the country’s first public gay–lesbian pride celebration, though it was attacked by both Radio Católica and Sandinista Radio Ya—prompting a women’s

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march on Radio Ya. In León and Managua, departmental FSLN congresses passed resolutions that ‘no member of the FSLN shall be discriminated against for his or her sexual orientation’. Every FSLN member of the National Assembly voted against the Chamorro government’s proposal in 1992 for a new anti-gay law—which nonetheless passed.\(^{60}\) While the Nicaraguan gay–lesbian movement is very much on the defensive, it has given an important new example of linkage between gay–lesbian liberation and anti-imperialist revolution.

**Toward Gay–Lesbian Liberation in the Third World**

Third World lesbians and gay men have unique problems with which to wrestle. They cannot simply follow the path that European and North American movements have mapped out, yet they may have a unique potential to participate in the social transformation of their countries. They can learn from the reciprocal forms prevalent in European and North American gay–lesbian communities, without mimicking European and North American gays in building fully fledged gay ghettos or in marginalizing diverse sexualities. Third World lesbians and gay men can make their own, distinctive contributions to gay–lesbian liberation. In the words of two South Africans: ‘From the “developed” world we inherit notions of sexual freedom and gay subculture; from the “developing world” we gain the imperatives of struggle, resistance, and social transformation.’\(^{61}\)

What possibility is there for masses of people in the Third World to experience same-sex eroticism freely, outside the constraints of both anti-gay repression and capitalist sexual exploitation? Lesbians and gay men can experience a considerable degree of freedom in the richest countries of Western Europe, despite the ghettoization, gender and family constraints, and all-pervasive heterosexual hegemony that exist there. But this kind of freedom depends on a level of economic development that is beyond the reach of Third World countries under capitalism, at least in the current time of global economic crisis.

Given the rapid growth of gay–lesbian movements in the Third World in the past decade, if new left breakthroughs do occur in the Third World, the prospect of their linking up with gay–lesbian liberation movements seems possible. For the majority of lesbians and gay men in the Third World, successful opposition to capitalism probably offers the best hope for the near future of loosening the constraints on their sexuality. True, any social transformation that remains limited to the Third World will inevitably contend with poverty; and poverty cruelly limits sexual freedom in various ways. Housing is necessary to free people, particularly women, from dependence on their families, and give gay–lesbian relationships the space they require. Good jobs are necessary to avoid making the sex trade the only option for many gay youths. Public child-care programmes are necessary for lesbians and gays to participate

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equally in child-rearing. Massive health-care funding is necessary in order to deal with AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases. The internal redistribution of wealth is unlikely to provide any Third World country with all these necessary resources without massive aid from governments in the richer countries. Without them, only limited steps toward gay–lesbian liberation are possible.

Yet even within these limits, Third World gay–lesbian movements could make important contributions to revolutionary processes, contributions that could materially improve lesbians’ and gay men’s lives in their own countries and inspire lesbian and gay men elsewhere. Even in a country as poor and isolated as Nicaragua, gay people’s lives are different because a revolution took place; and the solidarity of North American and European lesbians and gay men at least helped the movement contend with the constraints of poverty. Revolutions in countries that are larger, more industrialized and urbanized, and that already have gay–lesbian movements would have correspondingly greater possibilities. They could take measures that not only would increase sexual freedom but would serve as transitions in the long run to full gay–lesbian liberation, inasmuch as they would have to challenge both pre-capitalist forms of sexuality, with their rigid gender and kinship systems, and capitalist sexuality, with its fetishized categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

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. True, there are risks for the Left in being associated with this issue, particularly in Third World countries where gay–lesbian movements are often very weak and prejudice is pervasive. But the risks are far greater of the Left’s being left behind as gay–lesbian movements develop and move forward in the Third World, as they are doing and will do.