



Top: Argentina and neighboring countries in 2004.

Above: Downtown Buenos Aires viewed from a preserve on the bank of the River Plate.

Argentina

by Pablo Ben

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One of the largest and potentially wealthiest countries of Latin America, Argentina has suffered in recent decades because of a pervasive economic crisis. Until 1930 the country was governed by democratic rule, but since 1930 military dictatorships--often supported by the elite classes and the United States--have frequently ruled the country.

There has recently been progress in securing recognition for glbtq people in Argentina. Indeed, in 2010 Argentina became the first Latin American country to achieve marriage equality nationally. Still, the country has a long history of defining itself in terms of masculinity and in opposition to sexual deviancy.

History

The River Plate was colonized by Spain in the sixteenth century. To a greater extent than in other Latin American countries, the native Indian cultures were exterminated, and there has been little research on same-sex sexualities in the ancient Indian cultures or during the Colonial period.

On July 9, 1816 the United Provinces of the River Plate became independent. Those provinces occupied only a part of what would later become the territory under Argentine State control. The relationship between these provinces that would later constitute Argentina was marked by conflicts from the beginning.

The elite represented these conflicts through literary narratives that featured telling sexual images. For example, Esteban Echeverría's 1840 tale "El Matadero" [The Slaughterhouse], one of the founding texts of Argentine literature, depicts the Federal faction as savage because they threaten to kill a Unitarian man by penetrating him anally. In other cases, the authors represent the faction they want to portray favorably as masculine and the opposed political group as feminine.

In the 1860s Argentina became a unified territory. The nation-building process was finally consolidated in the 1880s. At this moment of consolidation, the elites, inspired by European Social Darwinism were concerned about creating a national identity associated with masculinity and sexual "normalcy." Any deviation from the sexual and gender norm was perceived as an obstacle to progress.

Lucio Vicente López's 1884 novel *La gran aldea* [The great town] portrays Buenos Aires' history by focusing on a sexually deviant woman who controlled the political faction opposed to that of the author.

Many other literary works of the period presented similar images of deviant men and women. In *La Bolsa* [The stock exchange], by Julián Martel, the 1890s economic crisis is interpreted as caused by nymphomaniac women and effeminate Jewish investors. In 1896 Eduardo Holmberg constructed a similar representation, depicting a mysterious serial killer as a woman who cross-dressed.

These literary works were not only important cultural artifacts, but they were also political ones. From the

very beginning of the Argentine state, deviant sexual conduct was conceived as politically dangerous; and accusations of sexual deviancy could be a potent political tool.

The Early Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, physicians began to medicalize homosexuality as a pathology affecting individuals and the nation. They believed that the poor Italian and Spanish immigrants were responsible for importing all kinds of sexual deviance into Argentina. José Ingenieros and Francisco De Veyga were the first psychiatrists who published "scientific" studies of male and female "sexual inversion," using European theories to explain local developments.

Physicians, as well as state officials and other ideologues of the period, were concerned about the growing urbanization of Argentina because it was creating anonymity and the relaxation of moral customs. They feared that this was contributing to the emergence of queer communities.

Buenos Aires had an important queer community by the beginning of the twentieth century. There were cruising areas near the River Plate where sailors and newly arrived immigrants gathered. The queer subculture also developed its own argot and social customs.

According to Jorge Salessi, until 1914 physicians and state officials chose to attack same-sex sexuality as a degrading pathology, but after that year their strategy changed. They began censoring public debate about the existence of "inverts" and "pederasts." The censorship of a play from that year, *Los Invertidos* [The Inverts], marks this change, according to Salessi. This play about men who hide their same-sex sexual desire by accusing others of being "degenerates" was prohibited after nine performances. After that, "sexual inversion" seems to have disappeared as a topic of public debate. However, the pathologizing of homosexuality continued in medical and "scientific" journals.

In 1930 Argentina had the first coup d'état in the country's history and the following decade was characterized by military governments and presidents who had been elected through fraud. In this context, conservative politics dominated and the Roman Catholic Church began to play a stronger role within the state. Prostitution was prohibited and police persecution of homosexuals increased.

The emergence of Peronism in the 1940s increased nationalist fervor and continued the pattern of equating Argentine identity with masculinity, while representing homosexuality as a danger to the nation. In fact, during Perón's rule, prostitution was endorsed as an effective way of preventing men from having sexual intercourse with other men.

Little is known of the period between the 1950s and the end of the 1960s because the few scholars who research queer studies in Argentina have concentrated on previous periods.

Emergence of Gay Activism

In 1969, however, the first Argentine gay and lesbian organization was created. Named Nuestro Mundo [Our World], it had a development independent of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States. This organization was unaware of the Stonewall Riots and the growth of the gay and lesbian movement at this time in the U.S. In 1971 they learned about the events in the United States and adopted a new name, Frente de Liberación Homosexual (FLH), [Homosexual Liberation Front]. In 1972, the first lesbian political group was formed, Safo, and it became a member of the FLH.

Although the name Frente de Liberación Homosexual may reflect an influence from the United States, the group saw their fight differently from the movement developed in the U.S. According to the FLH, gay men and lesbians had to be part of the process of liberation that was occurring at the time in Argentina. They constructed alliances with the Argentine left, especially with left wing Peronism, and they thought that it

was important to build a country free from imperialistic domination. Some activists from the FLH, such as Manuel Puig and Néstor Perlonger, later became renowned as intellectuals and artists.

In 1976 there was another coup d'état. This period of military dictatorship was the cruelest in Argentinian history, and the growing social conservatism affected glbtq people. Many members of the FLH were among the 30,000 "disappeared" people. They were kidnapped and murdered, while others were forced into exile. Few activists from this generation are still alive, because those who did survive later had to face the AIDS epidemic.

The Transition to Democracy

In 1984 there was a new transition to democracy. At this time the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA) [Argentine Homosexual Community] was created. This organization was inspired by the emergence of the Human Rights movement at the time and its main slogan referred to the free practice of sexuality as a human right.

The CHA tried to stop police persecution, they offered legal services, and they encouraged public discussion of sexual freedom. In 1992, after a contested public debate, the CHA was recognized as a legal entity.

The feminist group Lugar de Mujer sponsored lesbian-themed workshops and think tanks. The lesbian magazine and group, *Cuadernos de Existencia Lesbiana*, emerged in 1987.

The 1990s

During the 1990s gay men and lesbians began to be recognized as equals by some sectors of the population. In 1996 the newly written Constitution of the city of Buenos Aires included sexual orientation in an anti-discrimination article. The city of Rosario also included sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination statute.

During the 1990s many new organizations were created and the Argentine glbtq movement grew in diversity. Lesbians found their own space in several groups and transgendered individuals began to fight against police persecution, which continues to be a problem.

In Argentina people known as "transvestites" constitute an identity different from cross-dressers or drag queens. They are people whom Americans would describe as transgendered. They are persons raised as men who not only cross-dress but also use silicon transplants and hormones to grow breasts and feminize other parts of the body, and they frequently identify as women. Although "transvestites"--like transsexuals--transform their bodies, they do not seek sexual reassignment surgery.

While hate crimes directed at glbtq people are all too common, the repression of gay men and lesbians became less pervasive at the end of the twentieth century. However, transsexuals and transvestites continued to suffer persecution. Many of them had to seek refuge in other countries as political exiles.

Recent Events

In spite of the fact that the police have recently become increasingly repressive as part of a general tendency in Argentine society unrelated to queer issues, there have been positive changes in the new century.

In 2003 the city of Buenos Aires approved same-sex civil unions. Although civil unions did not provide all the benefits of heterosexual marriage, the law created new possibilities and expectations among members of the queer community.

In addition, during the new century Buenos Aires became a major tourist destination for gay and lesbian

travelers across the world. This economic development both energized the local glbtq groups and also served to increase tolerance throughout the country.

In 2009, a judge in Buenos Aires granted a gay couple permission to be married. The couple, Alex Freyre and José María Bello, became the first same-sex couple to be legally married in Argentina. The ruling permitting that marriage applied only to that couple, though subsequently eight other couples were also married as a result of separate judicial rulings.

Meanwhile, legislation that would legalize same-sex marriage nationally advanced in Congress, and a lawsuit that would legalize same-sex marriage was filed for review by Argentina's Supreme Court.

In May 2010, at the urging of President Cristina Fernández, Argentina's House of Representatives approved a marriage equality law. On July 15, after an impassioned debate that lasted almost 16 hours, the law was ratified by the Senate.

The victory in Argentina came after strenuous efforts to derail the legislation by the Roman Catholic and Mormon churches. President Fernández criticized the tone taken by the religious groups, saying that they "recall the times of the Inquisition."

Marriage equality advocate Evan Wolfson issued a statement hailing the historic vote as a measure of how far Catholic Argentina has come, from dictatorship to true democratic values."

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Pablo E. Ben researches the history of sexuality in Latin America. He has published articles considering the medical construction of sex and hermaphroditism in Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. He has also explored other issues associated with sexuality, social control, and the nation-building process in Argentina. His research focuses on Argentina, but through a comparative view of other Latin American countries. He is completing his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago.