



São Paulo

by James N. Green

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The 2004 Pride Parade in São Paulo, Brazil.
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Greater São Paulo, South America's largest metropolis with a population of 17 million, is Brazil's industrial powerhouse. Riding on the wave of the state's coffee boom during the early twentieth century, the city of São Paulo attracted large numbers of European immigrants, as well smaller numbers of Japanese and Middle Easterners. Today, the metropolitan area is the country's automotive, appliance, and apparels manufacturing center, as well at the nation's financial hub.

Because of its prosperity, São Paulo has been a magnet for migrants from more impoverished regions of the country, many of them gay and lesbian. It hosts Latin America's largest glbtq Pride Parade in June when over a million people slowly follow a dozen sound trucks and dance to syncopated rhythms through the state capital's financial district to a downtown street festival.

The Early Twentieth Century

In the early twentieth century, the Anhangabaú Park near the historic city center provided cruising grounds for men seeking sexual liaisons with other men during São Paulo's characteristically misty and drizzling nights. Although homosexuality was not a criminal offense, the Brazilian medico-legal establishment considered it to be pathological behavior caused by hormonal imbalances.

In 1938, a group of students from the Institute of Criminology sought out "passive pederasts" in the Anhangabaú Park to interviews in order to verify their "deviance." The report of this research, while presented as a scientific investigation, merely reinforced social stereotypes about effeminate men who sought sexual partners with "real men." This material, however, also unintentionally revealed the complex support networks that men who had sex with other men created in response to social disapproval.

Twenty years later, in 1958, José Fábio Barbosa da Silva, a young sociologist at the University of São Paulo, carried out the first modern research project that cast a favorable light on this subject. Interviewing seventy middle-class men, he found that they were generally happy and well adjusted, but suffered social pressure and feared family ostracism.

His work also mapped the social geography of same-sex male eroticism in the downtown region. An article based on his research, entitled "Homosexuality in São Paulo" and published in the nation's most prestigious sociological journal, marks the first positive academic treatment of homosexuality in Brazil.

Until the late 1950s, in spite of considerable social and sexual activities in the parks, train stations, bus terminals, and streets, São Paulo did not have gay bars. The social lives of lesbians and gay men in São Paulo in the 1940s and 1950s, revolved around intimate parties and gatherings in friends' houses. During the late 1960s, as the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 clamped down on political opponents and increased cultural and media censorship, many new gay bars and clubs opened up. Although the dictatorship squashed overt political opposition to military rule and censored "immoral" artistic expressions with homoerotic content, São Paulo's nightlife expanded.

Activism

In the late 1970s, students, intellectuals, labor, community-based organizations, left-wing sectors of the Catholic Church, and opposition politicians formed a broad coalition to push the ruling generals toward political liberalization. As the military's grip over the political system loosened, a group of students, young intellectuals, and others from São Paulo formed Brazil's first political gay organization, known as *Somos* (We Are): Group for Homosexual Affirmation. It quickly grew in size and inspired the formation of a dozen similar organizations nationwide.

The first major conflict within the Brazil glbtq movement occurred in 1980 when a majority of the members of *Somos* participated in a May Day demonstration with 200,000 others in support of a general strike against the economic policies of the military regime. This attempt by a sector of the newly emergent movement to build strategic alliances with labor, left, and progressive forces faced resistance from some gay and lesbian activists, as well as segments of the Brazilian left that still considered homosexuality either immoral or an illness. However, over the last twenty years, lesbian and gay caucuses have been established in the United Socialist Workers' Party and the Workers' Party.

The economic recession of the early 1980s and the advent of AIDS lessened glbtq activism in São Paulo for a period, as people tried to figure out how to respond to the new health crisis.

Lesbian activists regrouped by working with the feminist movement. By the late 1990s newly formed groups coalesced to organize the São Paulo parades that have grown exponentially since 1997 from 3,000 to over a million participants. The June celebration is Brazil's largest glbtq event, and it has become a national happening, attracting people from all over the country.

São Paulo Today

Marta Suplicy, the current mayor of São Paulo and a leader of the Workers' Party, sponsored domestic partnership legislation when she was a Federal Congresswoman. Both the militant labor movement that led the strike wave in the 1970s against the military regime and the Workers' Party that has become the largest leftist political party in Latin America emerged in São Paulo. In October 2002, Luis Ignácio Lula da Silva, Brazil's most important labor leader and a founder of the Workers' Party, was elected the President of Brazil with 61% of the vote. Many activists expect that this victory will help efforts to push through progressive legislation on glbtq issues in the Brazilian Congress.

As Brazil's richest city and one of the country's leading cultural centers, São Paulo has become the home of gay and lesbian film festivals, art exhibits, and other cultural activities. In addition, it prides itself on its vibrant, diverse, and extensive glbtq night life.

Although the city is an endless expanse of high rises and urban sprawl, it nevertheless continues to attract gay and lesbian migrants from throughout the country. In São Paulo, they seek excitement, economic possibilities, social freedom, and a certain distance from the disapproving eyes of their families in other parts of Brazil.

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About the Author

James N. Green is Associate Professor of Latin American History at California State University, Long Beach and president of the Brazilian Studies Association. In 1978, he was co-founder of *Somos*, Brazil's first gay and lesbian rights organization. He is the author of a prize-winning social history of same-sex desire in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*. He is currently working on a second volume, *"More Love and More Desire": A History of the Brazilian Lesbian, Gay, and Transgendered Movement*.