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Art by: Jesus Romeo Galdamez

Inside: Canada and Mexico talk free trade

AIDS in Latin America

by Francisco Ibanez

Gay people all over the world, and particularly the western gay population, have undergone an Americanization of "Gayness." This influence is evident in Latin America, mostly among those gays who are daringly "out of the closet". They have had the wit and the guts to survive successive bouts of brutal military repression, and have also survived one of the most endemic, ingrained forms of homophobia: machismo. Those who felt they did not have much to lose by being openly gay were usually either from the upper classes or from the lower classes. In both extremes, the social environment has provided Latin American gay males excuses to condone their "deviant" behaviour. In contrast, being lesbian carries a double stigma: that of being unable to satisfy a man and being unwilling to adopt a mother/housewife role. Lesbians do not fit the mythical and contradictory role of the virgin/whore. According to Latin American popular beliefs, "a man is a man." He can get married, have an outgoing social life, show his prowess, and "fool around." Men with money can simply get away with being queer. Lower class gay men have been generally regarded as a sort of handicapped people in their communities and treated as such. Women in the marginal barrios have always showed pity and compassion sheltering these homosexual men in their domestic worlds. Working class men, on the other hand, have generally treated gays as circus hunchbacks, creatures who are biologically dysfunctional. Gays are usually approached as women, as inferiors, and are raped and abused just like women.

The middle classes are often between a rock and a hard place in Latin America. They seem unable to climb up to the top and deeply fear falling into the rubble. In their pursuit for better values (ridiculously modelled after those values and tastes supposedly possessed by the upper classes), the middle class has traditionally displayed a convenient air of prudery and conservatism in relation to gays and lesbians. In the midst of these antagonistic elements, each particular Latin American country developed distinctive forms of lesbian and gay expression. The term "gay" has been widely adopted in Latin America because, as in U.S. English, it is fashionable, it represents status, and partly because the word gay had gradually gained respect and political strength in the North in the '60s and especially in the '70s.

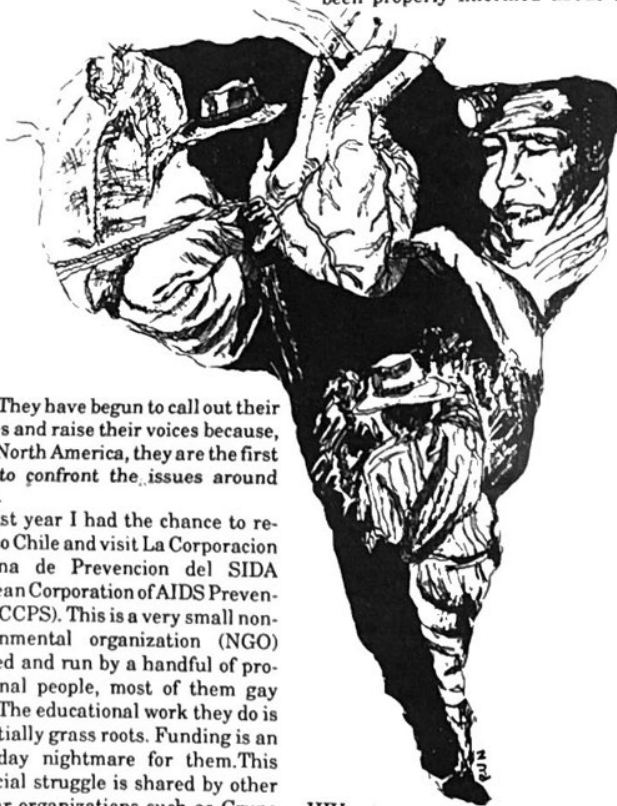
The development of Latin American gay and lesbian sexuality and identity has been less political than in

North America, but only in the sense that it was not institutionalized for a long time. This process is still in its inception today. It could not have been expedited on a continent that has been steadily exposed to political and, perhaps worse, to foreign and indigenous socio-cultural repression. It has been virtually impossible for gay men to be political in countries where the rigid class systems, the machismo, and often, the militaristic doctrine has actively dispossessed them of any possible voice. Lesbians have suffered more. In spite of this slow political development, gay groups in Latin America are now finding a strong source of identity and political representa-

tion. They have begun to call out their names and raise their voices because, as in North America, they are the first ones to confront the issues around AIDS.

Last year I had the chance to return to Chile and visit La Corporacion Chilena de Prevencion del SIDA (Chilean Corporation of AIDS Prevention - CCPS). This is a very small non-governmental organization (NGO) created and run by a handful of professional people, most of them gay men. The educational work they do is essentially grass roots. Funding is an everyday nightmare for them. This financial struggle is shared by other similar organizations such as Grupo Gay da Bahia (Bahia, Brazil), and Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (ACHA). One of the problems that they have encountered is that of how to define a public identity. No organization that wants to be public in Chile would ever call itself a gay or lesbian organization. Nor could they specifically advocate gay and lesbian rights. In a way, this may be an advantage. In North America, NGOs that deal with AIDS are invariably labelled "queer", which deters some of their potential to reach larger segments of the population. Some of the problems that CCPS has faced are obtaining medical help for confidential AIDS testing, attracting the attention of the local medical

and social authorities to the main issues around AIDS, and most importantly, educating people who are essentially unprepared for the epidemic and who sometimes do not want to listen to anything related to AIDS. I visited an annex of one of the main prisons in Santiago in July of 1989. The nurse that was in charge of this particular group of inmates who have been separated from the rest of the prison population because "they have AIDS", did not make any distinction between "living with" HIV+, ARC, or AIDS. I talked to some of the inmates in the squalid rooms that some 20 of them occupied. Their living conditions were extremely poor. They had never been properly informed about their



HIV+ status, or educated about their future and their personal care. In contrast, I clearly remember the nurse emphasizing the authorities' efforts to track down these people's contacts in order to "round them up." These gays from the lower and lower middle classes constitute most of the clientele of the CCPS which runs an informational workshop every Saturday and a support group for men living with HIV.

In Latin America and North America, care and compassion have taken a common shape. A reduced "out of the closet" section of the gay community takes care of the needs of all those who have an alternative sexuality or way of living and takes care of those who fall prey to AIDS (gay and non-gay).

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Non-governmental organizations devoted to providing human service and promoting change, disseminate information, carry out necessary research in the communities, and go to rallies. When they assist someone who is sick, they do not ask her/him if s/he was "out" and an AIDS activist before they got sick. Fair enough. What is not entirely fair is the double standards held by the government with respect to such groups. Authorities acknowledge AIDS issues only in part by delegating many of its responsibilities to gay and lesbian groups that it refuses to officially recognize.

Catholicism and militarism have also been shrines of prudery and denial. The reactions to the actual emergence of the AIDS epidemic have ranged from outright repression to inaction. In countries such as Cuba, gay people have been arbitrarily "medicalized" and penalized. Latin American governments have been doing little or no education to prevent the spread of AIDS. They have also done virtually nothing to help those living with HIV and AIDS. There is a paradoxical parallel between the reaction of those infected with HIV and the response of Latin American governments. The first reaction of most HIV+ people is that of denial. This has also been the initial reaction of authorities and the mainstream community. Only in the late '80s have the administrations of different countries slowly come forth with different efforts to control a disease

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The middle classes are often better off. They seem unable to climb up to the top and deeply fear falling into the rubble. In their pursuit for better values (ridiculously modelled after those values and tastes supposedly possessed by the upper classes), the middle class has traditionally displayed a convenient air of prudery and conservatism in relation to gays and lesbians. In the midst of these antagonistic elements, each particular Latin American country developed distinctive forms of lesbian and gay expression. The term "gay" has been widely adopted in Latin America because, as in U.S. English, it is fashionable, it represents status, and partly because the word gay had gradually gained respect and political strength in the North in the '60s and especially in the '70s.

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