

# “ACTING OUT OF FEAR”

## Queer Resistance During the Military Dictatorship in Brazil

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### ABSTRACT

Amid the Brazilian military dictatorship, at a time when moral repression authorized police persecution, the queer community marched the streets demanding an end to such violence. On June 13th, 1980, one thousand people came out in downtown São Paulo for the first organized queer demonstration in Brazilian history. This demonstration intended to denounce the police violence perpetuated in the center of São Paulo by the so-called Operation Cleansing, which had as its main promoter the police's precinct chief Richetti and queer bodies as one of its main targets. The event is analyzed with a focus on the study of emotions, mainly the concept of fear. Fear is conceptualized both as a tool of institutional control by the military regime and as a propeller of collective queer resistance against violence perpetuated by the State.

**Keywords:** queer history, Brazilian history, emotion.

That Friday, June 13, 1980, [...] almost a thousand people gathered in front of the Municipal Theater in the early evening. [...] Even under a certain climate of tension, some banners were opened that asked for Richetti's exoneration, protested against the precautionary prison experienced, and demanded an end to police violence, racial discrimination, and the release of prostitutes and *travestis*. Several letters signed by the various groups organizing the event were read (Trevisan 1980, 18; my translation).

The excerpt above was taken from a report by the homosexual newspaper, *Lampião da Esquina*<sup>1</sup>, a publication that erupted along with the formation of organized homosexual groups in the large Brazilian urban centers amid the military dictatorship established from a coup in 1964. The event reported by the newspaper<sup>2</sup> refers to a demonstration carried out by several groups of the LGBTQIA+ movement<sup>3</sup> at that time against the persecution and

1 *Lampião da Esquina* appeared in 1978 in a period when the dictatorship was beginning to enter its period of political opening (Pinto 2011, 35) and remained active until 1981. It can itself be considered one of the initial milestones of the Brazilian LGBTQIA+ movement.

2 It is relevant to observe that the cited article was written by one of the participants involved in the protest, highlighting his perceptions about the event.

3 The terms *homosexual*, *LGBTQIA+*, and *queer* will be used in the article to highlight the various ways that dissidents of gender and/or sexuality identify

violent arrests made by the police in the city of São Paulo, which had queer subjects as their primary target, especially *travestis*<sup>4</sup> and homosexuals.

The protest, which took place on June 13th, 1980, is considered the first public demonstration of the queer movement in Brazil (Simões and Facchini 2009, 112), being relevant not only for its purpose but for its courage in the face of a regime in which queer bodies were unwanted and persecuted. In this sense, I intend to analyze this event based on the potentiality of observing social movements by studying emotions. To do so, I will focus here on the discussion of *fear*. Thus, *fear* will, on the one hand, be seen as an outcome of an anti-communist discourse projected by the military dictatorship on queer bodies: not only as a way of controlling them but also of justifying the continuity of the regime for society. On the other hand, *fear* will be analyzed as a producer of a counter-reaction:

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and name themselves. At the time analyzed here, the term *homosexual* was used in Brazilian society for men or women with homosexual desires and even for trans people. Currently, the term *LGBTQIA+* emerges as an alternative to represent a more marked diversity of bodies and identities and to deal with the political and visibility demands of different sectors. Despite being popularized recently, the term *queer* is more used in academic circles and by researchers focused on gender and sexuality studies (Pelúcio 2014, 7). Despite the *LGBTQIA+* movement not being named that way in the time focused here, this term will be used to highlight how the movement identifies itself today and to account for a diversity that, although not named, was already present at that time.

4 The term *travesti* will not be translated in order to mark its historicity and Brazilian specificity. Although it can be understood within what researchers call trans identities (Oliveira 2017), *travesti* is an identity that is mainly observable in the Brazilian context. In addition, *travesti* must be seen as one of the identities that most destabilizes the fixity of heteronormativity since the *travesti* may or may not identify as a woman, making it possible to be interpreted as a new gender category. The historicity of the *travesti* must always be reiterated since its destabilizing potential has always been received in a violent and exclusionary way by society, stripping these subjects of their citizenship (Pedra 2020).

these queer bodies channeled the *fear* they felt towards the state and police violence to carry out a joint action of protest and resistance to repression.

In addition to the bibliography that will be used for this analysis, I highlight four main sources that were consulted for this work: the past issues of the newspapers *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo*<sup>5</sup>; the collection of the homosexual newspaper *Lampião da Esquina*<sup>6</sup>; and the documents from the homosexual group *Outra Coisa*, which emerged in São Paulo in 1980 and whose collection is available at the *Edgard Leuenroth Archive*<sup>7</sup>.

### ***Fear, queer bodies, and the Brazilian military dictatorship***

Just like Women's History, Queer History, and Social and Cultural History (Lewis 2020, 122), among many other subfields of history, the effervescence of historiography on emotions occurred only after overcoming a series of institutional obstructions that attempted to relegate to the studies of emotions a suspicious character and a supposed incompatibility to the Western notion of knowledge. However, in the last two decades, the opening of History to greater interdisciplinarity also benefited those who aimed at the historical study of emotions (ibid, 123), thus appearing not only institutionalized projects for this subfield but also academic journals and funding opportunities.

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5 Both newspapers digitized their collections and made them available for free. Past issues of *O Estado de São Paulo* can be consulted at: <https://acervo.estadao.com.br>; while those from *Folha de São Paulo* are available at: <https://acervo.folha.com.br>.

6 All editions of *Lampião da Esquina* are available at: <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

7 *The Edgard Leuenroth Archive* is located at the State University of Campinas (Brazil). The collection of the group *Outra Coisa* was consulted between June and August 2022. More information about the archive is available at: <https://ael.ifch.unicamp.br/>.

At the beginning of this century, attention was already being drawn to the need for research on social movements to also focus on studies on emotions, being emotional work an essential apparatus for developing and maintaining social movements (Gould 2002, 178). That is, the study of social movements from an angle that considers emotions is not about taking them as products of an irrational process of bodies that experience – and suffer from – the world similarly. Bringing emotions to the study of social movements means considering that “our thoughts, ideologies, and commitments are also influenced by aspects that can be seen as affective and emotional” (Wolff 2021, 237; my translation). Deborah Gould analyzes how looking at an emotion such as anger, for example, helps us to better understand how the queer group ACT UP in Chicago was constituted and maintained a successful and lasting history of political activism during the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic crisis. Gould emphasizes that mourning and sadness were re-signified by the group and transformed into anger, propelling the group’s political combative action (Gould 2002, 184). In this way, paying attention to the functioning of emotions can help us to better comprehend how groups within social movements are constructed and interact with their opponents and supporters. (Machado 2018, 88). For those reasons, my intention is to examine the possibility of writing Queer History of the Brazilian dictatorship, especially about Operation Cleansing and the demonstration of June 13th, 1980, perceiving how *fear* is pivotal in this narrative.

Theoretical definitions of a given emotion that can be replicated in different contexts are one of the demands placed on studies on emotions, especially by skeptics about the field. However, instead of focusing in the article on limited definitions that irremediably do not consider the historicity of emotions, my aim is to observe them in a contextual approach, that is, inspecting ways they affect bodies and transit between them (Ahmed 2004, 4). Thus, *fear* must be seen as a product of an association of past

histories (ibid, 63) that erupts in a specific conjuncture. A common aspect among such fear-producing associations is the notion that this emotion is produced and actualized within exercises of power (Aldana 2008, 2).

*Fear* during the Brazilian military dictatorship was an essential tool for the consolidation and maintenance of the regime. This emotion followed all bodies that, either by their armed resistance, in the case of oppositional guerrillas, or by their mere existence, in the case of queer groups, somehow represented a potential destabilizer of the regime (Borges 2021, 94). In other words: not all queer subjects were part of resistance groups or movements, but even their existence and public display could be read as a threat to the regime. Therefore, to understand the relationship between dictatorship and the LGBTQIA+ community, *fear* must be focused on since it was engendered as a desire for “preservation not simply of ‘me’, but also ‘us’, or ‘what is’, or ‘life as we know it’, or even ‘life itself’” (Ahmed 2004, 64). Fear is, in this way, a paradoxical device. It represents the anxiety experienced by the queer body in the face of repression. But it is simultaneously one of the preconditions for maintaining the regime: the fear caused by the public manifestation of the queer body as a justification for police violence and, ultimately, the continuity of the military in power.

Hence, the two decades of military rule in Brazil were possible, among many reasons, by the maintenance of *fear*. On the one hand, this *fear* was indeed generated by the government’s authoritarianism and its practice of censorship (Bezerra 2005, 214), being, therefore, an outcome of the regime. However, there was another *fear* also orchestrated by the regime, but which managed to present itself in a way that placed the dictatorship not as the source of fear but as the guarantee of protection concerning a threat.

## Brazilian queer history and the military dictatorship

In a context of domestic crisis, ideological disputes within the Cold War, and with political and financial support from the United States (Fico 2014, 30), the military staged a coup in Brazil in 1964, initiating a dictatorship that would rule the country for two decades. This period has seen in recent years a growing interest among researchers who focus not only on the various aspects of the regime<sup>8</sup> but also on the exaltation of the past of the Brazilian dictatorship in recent years, especially by right-wing extremists (Camargo, Moraes, and Rosa 2020, 83).

When it comes to a queer history of the military dictatorship, such attention within Brazilian historiography was largely unaddressed. This began to change with the realization of the National Truth Commission between 2012 and 2014. Such efforts in Brazil to deal with the atrocities committed by the dictatorship took longer than in other Latin American countries that also have suffered from their respective dictatorships, such as Argentina and Chile (Torelly 2018, 3). However, the National Truth Commission contributed to shedding attention on the issue, conducting public hearings on the dictatorship's persecution of queer subjects and producing final reports with recommendations for the guarantee of protection and rights

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8 Among the many works that could be referenced, I'd like to indicate some recent discussion trends. Professor Carlos Fico, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, has continued his pioneering work in studies on the military dictatorship, having in recent years focused on various topics, such as the end of the regime being controlled by the military themselves (Fico 2017) or the legal apparatus that helped to institutionalize the military regime (Fico 2021). In this same direction, researchers from the Federal University of Paraná have also focused on legal and juridic aspects during the dictatorship (Chueiri and Câmara, 2015). The Laboratory of Gender and History Studies at the Federal University of Santa Catarina is another highlight, which has been developing research on feminist resistance against the military regime (Wolff, Zandoná and Melo, 2019).

for this population (Green and Quinalha 2015). For instance, the second volume of the National Truth Commission's final report devotes about 14 pages solely to the discussion of the repression of queer communities during the military dictatorship (Brasil 2014, 299). This commitment seems to have influenced researchers within universities, as articles and dissertations on queer life during the military dictatorship have frequently been appearing since<sup>9</sup>. Thus, not only is Brazilian queer historiography expanded, but the dictatorial military regime can be understood more diversely and thoroughly.

## Dictatorship, anti-communism, and moral panic

At the time of the Brazilian military dictatorship, the authorities' discourse for the preservation of public morality and traditional customs was essential to legitimize and gather supporters (Quinalha 2021, 22)<sup>10</sup>. This public morality rejected all expressions that escaped heteronormativity. Thus, bodies that were not "intelligible", that is, those who challenged a mandatory "coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (Butler 1999, 23), were excluded from the realm of what the military leadership envisioned for the country. In this context, the regime engendered what Benjamin Cowan calls a moral panic, a series of

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9 For instance, less than a year after the second volume of the final report of the National Truth Commission, a collection containing various articles on the relationship between the dictatorship and homosexuality was released (Green and Quinalha 2015). Likewise, in 2016 a research paper on violence against *travestis* and trans people during the regime was published (Lopes 2016).

10 The Public Entertainment Censorship Division, the dictatorship's body responsible for controlling television, theater, and cinemas, among other sectors, received letters from concerned citizens (Fico 2002, 269) about what they believed to be an affront to morals and good customs in the country. These letters show that the moral issue had a potent appeal among supporters of the regime.

conceptions and anxieties regarding issues of sex, sexuality, gender, and entertainment that helped to legitimize military authority and its attacks on those who were seen as subversives (Cowan 2016, 10).

The analysis of anti-communism helps us to understand the propagation of this moral panic during the dictatorship. While a supposed communist threat within the Cold War was one of the core arguments of the military for carrying out the coup in 1964, the anti-communist sentiment was present in the Armed Forces since at least the 1930s (Fico 2014, 24). Such discourse, however, is not only linked to military, political, or economic issues but is also concerned with discussions about sexuality. The connection between anti-communism and sexuality did not emerge during the dictatorship but was a development underway in Brazilian society and intertwined with transnational connections and influences throughout the first half of the turbulent 20th century.

Therefore, in the 1930s and 1940s, the reaction of conservatives to the intense modernization that Brazilian society was experiencing was to demand the return of customs considered traditional and familiar (Cowan 2016, 22). Similarly, in the months preceding the dictatorship, thousands of people took to the streets calling for military intervention, which became known as *March of the Family, with God, for Freedom*, denouncing the danger of communist immorality in the country (ibid, 76). As they marched through the streets in 1964, these demonstrators clamored for the conservation of a Brazilian morality based on Christian values, which were allegedly being undermined by the communist infiltration in the country – public display of homosexuality being interpreted as one sign of such communist attack against Brazilian traditional beliefs. Part of the population evidently subscribed to the anti-communist discourse that the military rhetoric disseminated over the years preceding the coup. Thus, military anti-communism, the cry of conservatives for the resumption

of traditional values and customs, and the conception of the communist threat in the context of the Cold War were all combined during the regime after 1964.

One of the several examples of moral panic – which helped to build up anti-communist sentiment – can be found in the *Revista Militar Brasileira*, a journal aimed at a military audience and, evidently, a supporter of the regime. In one of its publications after the military successfully gained control of the State, one of the magazine’s editors denounces the alleged communist attack in the country, which could be confirmed by the cultural, religious, and sexual chaos that the youth were supposedly involved in. To exemplify this assumed decadence – and promote moral panic – the author mentioned the growing acceptance of homosexuality (Brasil 2014, 302).

### The manifold meanings of fear

Queer existences, then, were more than unwanted. They were a political and ideological concern. If perceived, whether receiving attention in the media or just showing affection in public, these bodies were interpreted as a subversive manifestation (Cowan 2015, 28). National Security was seen as being under attack from homosexual representation since the anti-communist rhetoric saw the dissolution of traditional family values as a subversive communist tactic during the Cold War (ibid, 29). In this way, publications aimed at the queer public, such as *Lampião da Esquina*, or the representation of homosexuality in television programs or plays, could be perceived as a strategy “to promote an anti-capitalist revolution through the weakening of the pillars of Brazilian society: the Christian religion and the family” (Quinalha 2021, 180; my translation).

In this sense, the regime’s anti-communist discourse was disseminated and reiterated among the population, promoting the dictatorship as the

nation's guarantee of protection against supposed attacks by communist forces presumably infiltrating the country. Guimarães (2007) analyzes, for instance, the many *fears* developed by inhabitants of Serra do Caparaó in the countryside of the Southeast coast in the 1960s due to the proximity of leftist oppositional groups to the dictatorship in the region. Based on the anti-communist rhetoric internalized by this population, such political opposition represented a "threat to the ideal society" (ibid, 294). Similarly, a survey of a small city in the Northeast of the country revealed the discourses that legitimized and raised the population's support for the regime used *fear* of the communist threat as a productive political tool (Cavalcanti 2015, 207). That is, by spreading fear of the communist threat among the population, the military not only justified the 1964 coup but also reinforced the need to maintain the regime to guarantee protection against imminent danger. Returning to the reflection of Ahmed (2004), for whom fear is intrinsic to the maintenance of oneself and what we know, dictatorship, for this population, represented the continuity of life as they knew and desired in opposition to the perceived threat of communism.

It is crucial, however, to notice that it was not the entire population that found the hope of preserving their way of life and themselves in the regime. After all, although all bodies *fear*, *fears* are not experienced in the same way and are not the same (ibid, 68). Borges (2021) notes how in the dictatorships in South America, the dissidents of gender and sexuality dealt with the fear they felt about the genocidal power of the military regimes aiming at eliminating queer subjects, experiences and existences, or at least removing or silencing them from the public space. The recollections of a lesbian activist who operated in São Paulo in the 1980s show, for example, that *fear* acted restrictively on her body in the most basic day-to-day tasks, frightening her for maintaining simple contact or conversations with colleagues on the street (Borges 2021, 99). Such dismay experienced when simply walking through the city confirms the spatial character of fear, as

it adjusts the social and physical space specifically to each body (Ahmed 2004, 69). Therefore, for the queer body, *fear* operates as an attempt to guarantee its survival not in relation to a supposed communist threat but to the State.

In the 1970s, despite the onset of what became known as a political opening, the moral control of society was intensified. Over the decade, after an intense period of political persecution and torture in the first half of the regime<sup>11</sup>, the dictatorship entered a phase in which, even though dismayed, it opened space for the developing of political opposition, consented to the return of exiles to the country and pledged to eradicate practices of torture.<sup>12</sup> Concomitantly, the nation experienced what Fico calls a revolution of morals (2015, 34), in which, mainly, the youth questioned imposed traditions, whether in fashion, music, or manners related to family and sexuality. Some influential singers of *Música Popular Brasileira* (MPB) – or Brazilian Popular Music –, some returning from their exile and again producing songs that challenged the regime, are probably the most significant symbol of this revolution of morals (Napolitano 2010, 390). Artists such as Chico Buarque, Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and

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11 In December 1968, the regime enacted Institutional Act 5, which suspended the guarantee of the remaining individual rights protected by the Constitution (Sales and Filho 2018, 206). Thus began the most arduous period of the dictatorship, in which the main cases of censorship, torture, the disappearance of people and the exile of opponents and critics of the regime happened. For an overview of this period, I suggest the publication by Gaspari (2014). The work by Sattamini (2010) debates one particular case of prison and torture during this period and observes how the regime repressed and persecuted its opponents. In addition, the research by Villaméa (2023) examines the specific challenges that women prisoners faced in the jails of the dictatorship.

12 This period is known as the "political opening" and is characterized by the repeal of Institutional Act 5 in 1978 and the approval of the Amnesty Law in 1979 (Resende 2014, 42). Concomitant with the flexibilization of the legislation by the military, the LGBTQIA+ movement developed in the country.

Milton Nascimento, among many others, used their lyricism to translate the aspirations of youth and represent the reality and dilemmas of Brazilian society (ibid., 392). In addition, the effervescence of groups organized within a LGBTQIA+ movement in the country also enters this context of political opening and contestation of moral precepts.

Paradoxically, it is precisely this moment of a political opening that the regime's control and moral persecution are most intensified, which has implications notably for queer bodies. Despite the regime having introduced a political opening, promising greater freedom for the press and authorization for the formation of opposition parties amid other rights, the military soon excluded moral liberalization from its project of political opening. In other words: although society was truly experiencing a period of loosening of the military's control, the regime intensified its crusade against what it considered to be a violation of Brazilian morality. In this sense, questions about gender and sexuality remained taboo for the regime, impacting notably the LGBTQIA+ community. Therefore, political flexibility was not necessarily accompanied by a liberalization of morals. Namely, the political opening arguably had to be compensated by the intensification of moral control (Quinalha 2021, 29).

In its anti-communist paranoia, the Brazilian military dictatorship saw gender and sexuality dissidence as a threat to national security and a communist tactic of national demoralization. It should not be understood, however, as if moral concerns about gender and sexuality were the main reason people were persecuted, tortured, disappeared, or killed throughout two decades of dictatorship. Despite the moral panic spread by the regime, it was mainly the political opposition and armed resistance that led many to the torture chambers of the regime. What should be noted is that among several possibilities of being denounced as subversive, the moral issue of sexuality was one among several others (Cowan 2016, 14). However, when

the repressive lens of the dictatorship turned to moral issues, queer bodies were the main ones that were persecuted and impacted. In this moment of political opening and intensification of moral control, queer subjects in downtown São Paulo faced one of the moments of most tremendous police violence, and that *fear* sown by the regime gave rise to the first public protest of the Brazilian LGBTQIA+ movement.

### Queering public space: greater visibility and moral panic

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the political opening provided a creative resumption in the arts and new possibilities for debate, although always under the imminence of possible censorship. The press observed more autonomy and freedom in its work, and new oppositional political alliances were formed. In this context, people whose claims had been largely ignored by both the regime and leftist oppositional groups began to organize and establish groups with specific demands, especially feminist and black activists (Macrae 2018, 98). In this sense, not only opposition to the dictatorship resurged but also a diversification of the manners in which leftist groups had operated until then, with the refusal of hierarchical assembling and the questioning of race and gender relations in these fields. Within this political and social background, the LGBTQIA+ movement was established in the country. Its participants sought to promote representations of homosexuals and/or queer subjects within society that challenged the hegemonic society's moral judgment on such bodies (ibid, 108).

It is important to note that queer groups and publications had already existed during the 1960s. This is the case, for example, of *Snob*, a homemade publication by homosexual groups in Rio de Janeiro from 1963 onwards (Costa 2010, 31). However, as well as other newspapers and queer groups,

*Snob* ended its activities in 1969, when the military regime radicalized repression. These first initiatives were terminated due to the panic installed during a period marked by arrests, disappearances, and torture. At the time, there was a *fear* of being observed on the street with a publication like *Snob* in hand and being mistaken as a member of some subversive or communist association (Green 2019, 324). New groups and publications emerged only after 1978 with the political opening, especially in the city of São Paulo.

In 1980, São Paulo, with more than 8 million inhabitants (Souza 2020, 372) and already the most populous municipality in the country, was at the epicenter of these political and social transformations. With the so-called revolution of morals (Fico 2015) and a growing LGBTQIA+ movement, new commercial enterprises of queer sociability were opened, such as bars, cinemas, and discotheques. Thereby, specific regions of the city began to demonstrate an intense circulation and socialization of queer subjects. The city center was the preeminent venue of this dynamic, conferring the confluence of bodies that contradicted the traditional values of Brazilian society and, consequently, of the dictatorial regime. Thus, homosexuals, *travestis* and sex workers, among others, gathered in the region. This imbrication in a specific area is what Néstor Perlongher defines as a “moral region”, that is, the constant transit of specific population strata in search of contacts and pleasures in common areas of an urban conglomeration (Perlongher 2008, 69).

Within a conservative society and a dictatorial regime with a strong defense of preserving traditional Christian moral values, it is self-evident that this region with a growing public display of queer sociability would receive the attention of the authorities. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to underline that LGBTQIA+ community did not start to be persecuted by the authorities and police forces only from that moment on. The arbitrariness

and violence with which public security agents dealt with this portion of the population has a long history and is supported not only by Brazilian morality and conservatism but by the legal intolerance of the period. In this sense, a 1941 decree inspired by Mussolini’s Italian fascist legislation, better known as the Vagrancy Law, demanded that every citizen prove their means of subsistence. However, the decree did not specify how such verification should occur, which relegated the guidelines for verification to the arbitrariness of the police forces (Ocanha 2014, 56). This legal device survived the 1964 coup and was widely used by authorities to arrest and persecute various sections of the population, including homosexuals. Therefore, even though homosexuality as such had not been criminalized in Brazil since 1830, a queer subject circulating in the city center could be easily arrested by the police based on such legal instrument. In the 1980s, the abuse of this legislation developed into an even greater injustice when the country was experiencing an untamed economic crisis with very high unemployment rates (Ocanha 2018, 80). This situation led many, including sex workers and *travestis*, to seek their livelihood informally and with no official proof of income. It is precisely this confluence of greater visibility of these subjects, an intensification of the regime’s moral discourse, the arbitrariness of the police forces, and an economic crisis that police attacks against the queer population intensified. Queer subjects and their spaces of sociability suffered recurrent police raids, which arrested this community without any accusation or evident crime, forcing such individuals into situations of humiliation and public exposure of their queer dissidence (Quinalha 2021, 43).

When studying segregation and citizenship in the city of São Paulo, one observes the frequent circulation of the “speech of crime”, which interprets certain places as dangerous and informs our reaction to that space (Caldeira 2000, 27). Thus, the *fear* arising from this discourse becomes something persistent (Ocanha 2014, 19). As spaces of LGBTQIA+ sociability became



more evident in the urban space, police and popular discourses that saw this visibility as a danger and, consequently, something to be fought, also intensified. Hence, authorities' efforts towards the degradation of queer bodies and their expulsion from the public space also escalated (Quinalha 2021, 33), a dynamic that reached its peak with the outbreak of Operation Cleansing in 1980.

The case of *travesti* is one of the main examples of moral panic arising from the greater presence of queer people in the public landscape. The *travesti* identity during the 1970s reached visibility in Brazilian urban centers, especially in cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, places where they found in the growing commercialization and commodification of sex (Green 2019, 413) ways to overcome their economic and social exclusion. Furthermore, this identity also emerged as a public mediatized subject (Veras 2015, 54). The media noted the *travesti* and exploited their image to attract the attention of readers and audiences. The *travesti* confused and heightened curiosity, as it was the body that, at that moment, most destabilized the impositions of heteronormativity and questioned the hegemonic morality of society and the military regime. This focus received by *travestis* drew the attention of the police authorities, who even promoted in 1976 a large commissioned study on the relationships between these people and the infractions against the Vagrancy Law (Ocanha 2015, 156). Therefore, we have a scenario of police concern and media attention on such bodies, which also emanated onto other queer individuals. In this context, in March 1980, the newspaper with the most significant circulation at the time, *O Estado de São Paulo*, published a series of articles reporting the supposed danger posed by *travestis* and calling out for an intervention by the authorities in the city of São Paulo.

## Operation Cleansing

The newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* maintained an editorial line consistent with the military regime and representative of the middle and upper class of the largest city in the country, thus presenting an evident conservatism. In addition to being an ally of the 1964 coup (Motta 2017, 369), the publication was also a continuous supporter of the dictatorial repression of left-wing groups (ibid., 371). Thus, combining its conservatism with sensationalism, the newspaper announced in the March 25, 1980 edition a series of reports with the following headline: "Danger! The invasion of travestis" (*O Estado de São Paulo* 1980, my translation). Three days later, the newspaper began its series, dedicating an entire page to denouncing the presumed danger posed by *travestis*. The *fear* – something which the population should have around such bodies, but also what the *travesti* should feel towards the hegemonic society – was propagated by the newspaper with statements such as: "The danger of travestis is already known by the police" or "Justice should be more rigorous, punish travestis and not facilitate their actions" (Barreto and Lombardi 1980, my translation). There is, in these passages, an evident "speech of crime", in which *fear* is produced and requires vigilance from society, the press, and, mainly, the police.

With uncommon promptitude among police agencies at the time, a few days after the publication of this series of articles, the authorities already presented the plan to confine *travestis* in a specific region of downtown São Paulo (Quinalha 2021, 67) to prevent them from transiting through regions considered nobler in the city. For such an assignment, it was expected to detain a large contingent through several police raids. To deal with such a large number of possible arrests, the authorities arranged to designate the *Hipódromo* penitentiary, where several detained *travestis* were already being held, as the exclusive destination for this operation

(ibid, 69). Hence, such a community was already a constant target of the police and, with the assistance of a media panic, moral repression was intensified, aiming to expel these queer bodies from the public eye. The development and execution of the plan came under the management of police chief José Wilson Richetti, who was already known for his violent actions and for bragging that he had supposedly expelled sex workers from São Paulo in the past (Facchini 2010, 91). In addition, the imminent visit of Pope John Paul II to São Paulo, scheduled for July 1980, fortified the authorities' justification (Quinalha 2021, 70) and attested to the need to deal with the alleged criminality in the city.

On May 22nd, 1980, Operation Cleansing was launched with full thrust in the city center. The newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, which began to report on the operation constantly, informed that the police aimed to arrest robbers and drug dealers in the region (Flosi 1980, 9). However, in an article on May 27th, 1980, updating recent developments in the Operation, Chief Richetti declared to the newspaper that 700 people had been arrested in one night, including homosexuals, *travestis*, and sex workers (Kotscho 1980, 11). In other words, it is evident that “the act of arresting criminals, in practice, had become the arrest of LGBTs and sex workers who frequented the city center” (Ocanha 2015, 162; my translation). Not even the chief of police, responsible for conducting Operation Cleansing, camouflaged the explicit moral intent of the police raids. Queer bodies, when perceptible in the region, were arrested and publicly humiliated, regardless of their professional status or activities in the target area.

Right at the beginning of the operation, the groups of the newly formed LGBTQIA+ movement in the city realized that the police forces were intensifying persecution against them. For instance, the homosexual newspaper *Lampião da Esquina* dedicated an extensive opinion article in its May 1980 edition, refuting the accusations made by the newspaper

*O Estado de São Paulo* two months earlier. *Lampião* highlighted how the series of articles about the *travestis* only called for police intervention and how this could become a violent repression against all queer subjects (Penteado 1980, 2)<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, during a party at a disco held by the group SOMOS, the biggest and most active homosexual group at that time, news arrived that two of its members who were heading to the disco in the city center were arrested and detained for a few hours (Macrae 2018, 287), even though they had presented the required documents that absolved them of any denunciation under the Vagrancy Law. Therefore, it was explicit that how the police acted in this moral region did justice to the name of the operation, aiming at the expulsion from the public space of bodies that challenged traditional – and dictatorial – Brazilian morality.

Allegations of abuse and torture by the police soon began to surface due to Operation Cleansing. The first was in the weekly magazine *IstoÉ*: a picture of a *travesti* being trampled and pressed to the ground in one of Richetti's police raids (Trevisan 2018, 607). In yet another update on the development of Operation Cleansing, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* reported on June 9th a series of complaints made by detainees, primarily sex workers, about how they were captured and the treatment they received during detention. Complainants reported cases of physical abuse, loss of teeth, and even miscarriages because of physical violence inflicted by the police. Idália, just 22 years old, explained how she had been detained twice in less than 48 hours, which made Richetti promise to arrest her for at least 15 days, intending to restrain her from circulating downtown.

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13 Darcy Penteado, author of the cited article and one of *Lampião*'s editors, was already a renowned artist in São Paulo at that time. His indignation over the accusations made against the *travestis* remained persistent that year. He would end up being one of the best-known participants in the demonstration against Operation Cleansing in 1980.

Idália's desperation led her to jump from the police station where she was being held, resulting in a series of fractures and hospitalization (Folha de São Paulo 1980a).

The *fear* of long-term detention and the desperation symbolized by using bodily harm to evade arrest did not begin with Operation Cleansing. In 1979, in interviews for the homosexual periodical *Lampião da Esquina*, *travestis* reported how they were always arbitrarily arrested, even if they presented the required documents. According to the recollections of one of the interviewees, the practice of cutting themselves with razor blades inside the cells had become common since the action forced the police to transfer them to health centers (Trevisan 1979). Operation Cleansing and the worsening of arbitrary arrests intensified the enactment of extreme measures, whether cutting with razor blades or Idália jumping out of the cell, for queer subjects to dodge the agents of repression and violence. Analyzing these desperate acts of bodily harm, it is evident how the *fear* of the violence experienced inside the police buildings determined a specific physical reaction. Self-inflicted injuries became a radical measure through which queer bodies responded to the *fear*.

The imprisonment of Vinícius Caldeira Brant during Operation Cleansing was the critical impetus for mobilizing authorities, personalities, and some parliamentarians against police violence. While the allegations of *travestis* and sex workers did not arouse a reaction from the authorities and indignation from society, the arrest of Brant, a cisgender white man and university researcher, spurred a much more significant public impact (Quinalha 2021, 77). But Brant's report to the press was important to legitimize the accusations against Richetti, having reported the unsanitary conditions of the prisons, the violence to which the *travestis* were subjected, and the fact that Richetti's detainees were being treated "as if they were in a concentration camp" (Luppi 1980, my translation).

While members of the artistic realm, such as actress Ruth Escobar, and a few parliamentarians, such as left-wing deputy Eduardo Suplicy, began to denounce Operation Cleansing in their circles and plea for the ceasing of the police raids, it was the new social movements at that time, especially the LGBTQIA+ movement, which engendered the greatest resistance to Operation Cleansing: the protest on June 13th, 1980. There was, therefore, a classic instigator for joint action between social movements: "The violence, unleashed by a state organism, served as a powerful unifier of social movements" (Macrae 2018, 289; my translation).

### Reaction against Operation Cleansing: the first Brazilian LGBTQIA+ protest

In the days leading up to the protest, members of the LGBTQIA+ movement at that time, especially the SOMOS group, circulated pamphlets around queer venues in downtown São Paulo disclosing the abuses committed by Operation Cleansing. Highlighting homosexuals, *travestis* and sex workers as the police's main targets, the pamphlets summoned the community for the protest on the steps of the Municipal Theater. The report published later by *Lampião da Esquina* attests to the presence of at least 1000 people at the protest who adopted a combative demeanor, shocking the aghast spectators with queer bodies embracing and kissing (Trevisan 1980, 18). Before the demonstration began to move through the streets, a manifesto was read to those present, denouncing abuses and violence committed by Richetti and the police force under his control. The 12 groups that signed the letter represented an alliance between the various sectors of the social movements that generated the protest (Ocanha 2018, 84). The event, mainly organized and attended by queer groups and subjects, also received support from feminist associations and the

black movement, highlighting the connections, even if limited<sup>14</sup>, of social movements fighting against specific collective violence.

After reading the manifesto, the demonstrators headed to the busy streets of the city center of São Paulo, chanting protest cries that demanded the arrest of a police chief, Richetti, the freedom of the *travestis* still imprisoned, the end of repression and the introduction of transversal themes, such as the demand for more jobs and the fight against racism. According to the participants' reports, chanting in support of sex workers led several of them – who did not participate in the protest for fear of repression but who lived in the surrounding buildings – to go out onto their balconies and join the chorus of the protesters (Trevisan 1980). Furthermore, according to an article published in *Lampião* a few days later, middle and upper-class homosexuals, also regulars of bars and specific venues in the city center, observed the ongoing protest in astonishment and a mockery manner. This confirms the intersections of race and class that must be observed in the unfolding of Operation Cleansing. Although any queer body was subject to violence and police arrest, it was the most marginalized, poor, and black that repression was most focused on. Consequently, these bodies already exposed and publicly humiliated were the most engaged ones in public resistance to the actions of Operation Cleansing.

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14 It is important to emphasize that, despite these alliances being recognizable, the intersections between the homosexual movement and other sectors occurred in a localized way and with specific objectives. Regarding the black movement, for example, although the intersection between both movements was observed at different times, this did not translate into a robust discussion about race in many sectors of the homosexual movement, as well as homophobia in sectors of the black movement often continued unquestioned. See Pinto and Pedro (2022).

Despite the demonstration being successful, amounting to limited but supportive press coverage<sup>15</sup>, Richetti did not feel dismayed by the demonstrators and mocked the participants in his statements, going so far as to say that he would head to the city cathedral to pray and have the certainty of not inhabiting Sodom and Gomorrah (Quinalha 2021, 81). Nevertheless, the June 13th event and the denunciations made by politicians and artists to the press partially undermined Richetti's power and led him to gather further support for his actions. On June 17th, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* reported on the support Operation Cleansing received from business owners in the city center. These supporters believed that the “cleansing” promoted by Richetti would also mean the end of violence in the region (*Folha de São Paulo* 1980b). Merchants and middle-class inhabitants of downtown São Paulo, overwhelmed by the public presence of queer bodies on the streets of São Paulo, came out in support of Richetti's actions (ibid, 85), evidencing that Operation Cleansing translated a moral panic that was not only institutional but also social during the military dictatorship.

A formal demand for clarifications about the allegations of police abuse and violence occurred only one month later after the beginning of Operation Cleansing. Despite a rate of only 0.8% of those detained being proven criminals (Trevisan 1980) and the numerous reports of abuse and violence, Richetti and his police force were able to terrorize the queer community for over a month, assembling a scenario of fear and anguish among the LGBTQIA+ community. Regardless of being summoned to testify in

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15 Unlike *O Estado de São Paulo*, which had been responsible for the reports denouncing *travestis* and demanding police intervention, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* became the main large publication to denounce the abuses of the Operation Cleansing. For this reason, the day after the protests, the newspaper highlighted the demonstration, specifying the allegations of abuse and violence against the police operation (*Folha de São Paulo* 1980b).

front of the Municipal Assembly, an event that included the presence of segments that participated in the protest on June 13th, Richetti received the support of several parliamentarians, and the denunciations achieved few practical results.

Police raids persisted in terrorizing homosexuals, *travestis*, and sex workers, among others, at different times and places, whether in a more organized manner, such as under Richetti's command or occasionally. In a letter to *Folha de São Paulo* at the end of June 1980, one of the members of the *Outra Coisa* – a new homosexual group that emerged in São Paulo that year – thanked the newspaper for publishing the accusations against Richetti. In the letter, it is attested that those who had witnessed the actions of Operation Cleansing would have thought “that Brazil was reliving the horrors of Nazi-fascism in the 1940s, in Germany and Italy” (*Outra Coisa* 1980a, my translation). By recovering the memory of the Nazi and fascist persecution of homosexuals in Europe, the sender of the letter intended to make explicit the violence carried out by Operation Cleansing, the widespread *fear* felt by those who witnessed such acts, and to ask the newspaper to continue to be an ally in further accusations.

This concern about the need to pursue the allegations against Richetti was well-founded. Even with the mobilization of queer groups and the denunciations published in the press, Richetti's operations again specifically attacked places of homosexual sociability in November 1980. In an open letter to the press, the main homosexual groups in the metropolitan area of São Paulo denounced the police brutality across several bars in the city, especially Ferro's Bar, frequented mainly by women. The document also reports that these women were being arrested meanwhile the police shouted: “You are lesbians!” (*Outra Coisa* 1980b). Thus, being queer continued to be seen as a justification to be arrested.

In addition, Richetti's operation inspired similar actions in other regions of the city and other municipalities. In November 1980, a joint document signed by several groups of the LGBTQIA+ movement denounced efforts like those of Richetti in other cities in the state of São Paulo and reported the majority arrest of homosexuals (*Outra Coisa* 1980c). Therefore, Operation Cleansing intensified moral repression not only in the area where it actually operated but ultimately translated the regime's ideology and the moral panic it intended to reinforce. Operation Cleansing was the outcome of a policy of *fear*, supported by the anti-communist discourse and justified by a moral crusade for the maintenance of norms and customs.

### Fear as propellant

Operation Cleansing, therefore, was spawned by the confluence of an anti-communist discourse – which encompassed the queer body as a threat – and *fear* as artifice that justified the regime but also an emotion that was felt by the queer body towards the state. Such confluence was translated into police violence as a response to the growing visibility of LGBTQIA+ sociability in the urban area at a time of political opening and escalation of moral repression. I would also like to add two more aspects that engendered Operation Cleansing: the first concerns the threat that the queer body represented to the maintenance of the compulsory heteronormativity; the second refers to the moral dread of the potential of all bodies being queer.

As mentioned, with the introduction of political opening and signs of exhaustion of the military's censorship and political power, the regime turned to an intensification of society's moral control. In this scenario, it is evident that ongoing national political turmoil was instrumentalized in a discourse that called for the resumption of “values and traditions that are perceived to be under threat” (Ahmed 2004, 76). Thus,

homosexuals and *travestis*, among others, were seen not only as a sign of communist infiltration in the country but, ultimately, the destabilization of heteronormativity itself. For this reason, from the moment that queer subjects achieved greater visibility and possibilities of living and playing a leading role in the urban space, actions such as Operation Cleansing were put into practice. That is, the public presence of these queer personas represented “the failure of the norm to take form; it is the proximity of such other bodies that ‘causes’ the fear that forms of civilization (the family, the community, the nation, international civil society) have degenerated” (ibid, 78). In other words, the greater visibility of the queer body in the urban center – concomitant with the uncertainty of the continuity of the military regime – was interpreted as a sign of the failure of the nation ideal that the hegemonic society, mainly the middle and upper classes, aimed for the country. Therefore, queer bodies represented not only an alleged communist attack but the failure of a heteronormative society that valued Christian morals and, preferably, had in the military the guardians of its safety and existence.

The second aspect, intrinsic to the fear of destabilizing the norm, is the potential that everybody has to be queer. For instance, the concomitant fascination and hatred towards the *travesti*'s body at that period happened because they destabilized the fixity of gender and sexuality norms to their fullest extent. The police forces, under Chief Richetti, when passing through the city center, arrested all bodies that had a queer potential – any destabilizing performance of heteronormativity – or that were passing through the place. This was due to the fear of one of the bodies from which the destabilizing potential emanates escaping, which justified detention and widespread violence. Thus, “fear works to expand the mobility of some bodies and contain others precisely insofar as it does not reside positively in any one body” (Ahmed 2004, 79). As much as these authorities tried to establish parameters that identified queer subjects –

such as the centrality given to the “effeminate homosexual” by the police (Green 2019, 140) – many of these bodies escaped the expectations of the authorities, which further increased the *fear* about the impossibility of controlling and apprehend the totality of these people. In this way, the arbitrary apprehension of anyone in that moral region resides precisely in this *fear* about the possibility of some bodies escaping. Hence, the mobility of these subjects was severely reduced.

Operation Cleansing must be interpreted as a violent outcome of the discourse of *fear* operated by the military dictatorship in Brazil. Fear of the alleged communist threat led a large part of the population to bet on the regime to guarantee their security. Similarly, the queer body, now in evidence in the public space, represented the *fear* of the communist attack on society. This was the case mainly for the middle and upper classes and supporters of the dictatorship, to whom the destabilization of the norm meant the end of traditional values. As a result, the queer community was seen by the police forces as a threat, and it was necessary to intensify the persecution of such subjects, restricting their mobility and visibility in the public space. Thus, Operation Cleansing translated into physical and institutional violence, an ongoing moral panic of a society in effervescent transformation, trembling between dictatorship and eminent re-democratization, between religious and secular values, between traditional beliefs and a moral revolution.

Homosexuals and *travestis*, for the sheer fact of transiting in a specific region of the city – a large concentration of spaces for queer socialization – lived with the constant *fear* of imminent arrest and the possibility of being humiliated, extorted, and violated, psychologically and physically. However, it was exactly this *fear* that also promoted an alliance between these bodies and an organized resistance, which culminated in the protest on June 13th. It is imperative to remark that concomitantly with

Operation Cleansing, the incipient Brazilian LGBTQIA+ movement was experiencing a major internal crisis due to incompatibilities and political disputes between groups and members. However, in this moment of crisis, the various participants in the movement overcame their incongruities and allied against the *fear* imposed by the police raids (Simões 2009, 236).

As Collins (2001) observes, one of the central dynamics within the organization of social movements is the transformation of shared emotions, such as fear, into “the feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm, and morality which arise in group members’ mutual awareness of their shared focus of attention” (ibid, 29). In the case of the Brazilian queer movement in the 1980s, the *fear* shared by individuals and imposed by the authorities and Operation Cleansing was translated into the internal reconciliation of the groups, even if momentarily, and the promotion of public protest against the violation of their rights. This further supports the thesis that one of the most effective drivers for alliance and action in social movements is the confrontation of groups with common enemies (ibid, 31). In the analyzed case, Operation Cleansing materialized an enemy, the delegate Richetti, and actions, the specific and coordinated raids, granting the queer community an evident and close enemy in common.

The cries of protest during the demonstration and the confrontation of the spectators with the exhibition and reiteration of queer identity – through performative gestures, physical contacts, and kisses, among others – denoted agency to these bodies, transforming their impotence into potency (Guzzo and Wolff 2020, 4). What can be seen in progress in these processes of instrumentalization of *fear* for collective action are the resistance possibilities that the collective public demonstration inaugurates (ibid, 6) and, clearly, the manipulation of emotions within such dynamics. Therefore, examining social movements from a scope that considers the dynamics of emotions in these processes is a valid and fruitful endeavor

to understand the history of these individuals, their struggle, and their strategies. Operation Cleansing can be observed as a merely local and municipal procedure in São Paulo in the 1980s. However, when we trace the *fear* and moral panic posed by the communist threat discourse, Operation Cleansing becomes more than just an authoritarian police venture under the support of the elite and the press. It comes to be understood as a local symptom of a national authoritarian political project. Likewise, the focus on emotions helps us recognize how an incipient social movement in crisis overcame its adversities and produced one of the landmarks of Brazilian queer history.

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