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Out a Night in Teresina:

The Twenty-First Century Comes to Piauí

By Raphael Soifer

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Piauí has long been the butt of jokes throughout Brazil. Many in the country consider the state to be "the northeast of the northeast," the most provincial part of a supposedly slow-changing and backwards region. Piauí makes up the middle of a vast stretch of dry, dusty *sertão*. Historically, it hasn't done much to attract visitors from the outside. While other states are famed for music or folk dances, unusual regional cuisine, or quaint local accents, Piauí is known mostly for just being there.

The state's name has become synonymous with the doldrums, with a lack of sophistication, and the quips keep coming. At least in the urban southeast, Piauí is often a punchline unto itself. In 2006, a hip new national literary magazine named itself *piauí* in mocking homage to a state with one of the country's least likely reputations for literariness (not to mention literacy). In July 2007, however, Roberto Zottolo, the head of the Philips Corporation's Latin American division, went too far. During an interview with *Valor*, a business publication, Zottolo called the state archaic and symbolic of government corruption. Ultimately, he said, "If Piauí stops existing, no one will be bothered."

Dionísio from the Teatro Que Roda (Theatre That Turns) troupe rappels down the front of the second-most expensive hotel in Teresina.

In previous decades, Zottolo's comment might have passed almost unnoticed. In today's more enlightened Brazil, however — where the president comes from a poor northeastern family and where people of traditionally marginalized backgrounds take pride in their heritage — ragging on a state in the *sertão* is guaranteed to attract an avalanche of negative publicity. As soon as Zottolo's comments were published, mainstream and alternative presses skewered him, and activists organized boycotts of Philips and rallies in support of the state. I heard so many of my *paulistano* friends rushing to Piauí's defense — even as the only one to have visited admitted quietly that he mostly agreed with Zottolo — that I decided to spend a few days in the state during my month-long bus trek across the northeast.

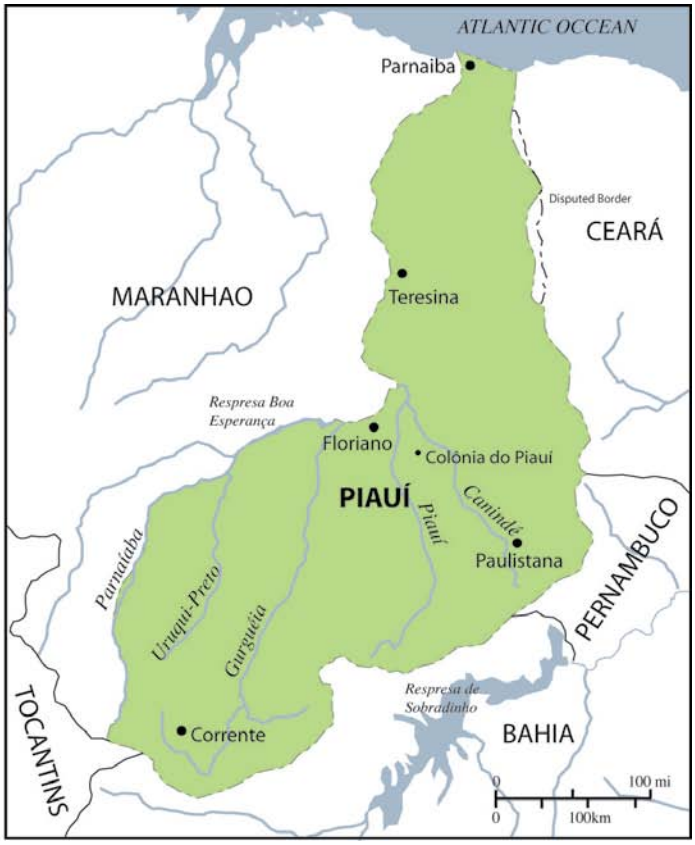
From a few internet searches before arriving, I realized that Zottolo hadn't done much to

keep up with the changes in Piauí. The state is still off the beaten track, out of the public spotlight, and susceptible to significant government corruption. In recent decades, though, Piauí has undergone a substantial overhaul. Teresina, its capital, has transformed into the northeast's primary center for (mostly private) health services. These days, fancy clinics and major hospitals sprawl over much of the city's downtown. People from all over the northeast — and increasingly, throughout the country — depend on hospitals in Teresina, and they would certainly be bothered if the state were suddenly to disappear.

Piauí's social movements have blossomed along with Teresina's growth. Major education and social programs have followed the hospitals, thanks in large part to investments from Lula's administration. For more than a decade the state's supposedly unsophisticated residents have frequently taken the rest of Brazil by surprise with their progressivism (at least when the rest of the country has bothered to notice). Colônia do Piauí, a small town of under 9,000 about eight hours south of Teresina, is the only municipality in the country to have voted a transgender politician to elected office. Katia Tapety, first elected as a *vereadora* (city council member) in 1992 with the right-wing PFL (Liberal Front Party), was reelected to her second term as the town's vice-mayor this October, this time with the Socialist Party.

For all of its impressive gains in recent years, however, Piauí still contends with major challenges. Teresina's health industry has already grown as big as it's likely to get, and other opportunities are scarce, especially in the state's interior. And the state's political past of *coronel*-style rule (RS-12) — based on a near feudal consolidation of power in a few wealthy land-owning families who govern through favors and threats — is still highly visible. Katia Tapety's election, for example, undoubtedly owes more to her father's involvement in local politics than it does to Colônia's open-mindedness. Piauí has willed itself into the twenty-first century with impressive speed, but it hasn't done away with remnants of the state's past — from crushing poverty to a penchant for brawling. During my short stay in the Teresina, I saw that Piauí's movement toward modernization has also brought its own set of problems.

I arrived in Piauí on July 29 well armed with trivia. Teresina is the hottest capital in Brazil, the only one located on a state border (across the Parnaíaba river from Maranhão), and it has the third-lowest crime rate. It also seems to have the only bus station in the northeast with wireless internet, a fact advertised proudly on giant posters all over the terminal. Even knowing the city's reputation for safety, though, I didn't bother to pull out my laptop and find out if it was working when my bus pulled in at 4:50 a.m. I spent my first day in town trying to track down Katia Tapety, who I hoped to visit in Colônia. I got her contact information easily, but couldn't reach her at home or on either of her two cell phone numbers. I found up later that she'd been holed up in a friend's house in Teresina on a private visit. Still, I saw examples of the change that Tapety represents on walls throughout Teresina's city center. At almost every intersection, posters advertised an upcoming "Diversity Pride" week, organized by local gay rights groups with support from the state and federal governments. By the time I found a single restaurant with a salad bar — dried and salted meat is still the major staple of *piauiense* cuisine



— I had already seen at least a couple of sound cars for the upcoming election proudly waving rainbow flags.

Teresina's fast track to urban restructuring means that, on most nights, there's at least one publically organized, admission-free arts event to draw in the sizeable chunk of local partiers who don't have the interest or the money for the city's ubiquitous electric *forró* clubs. On my first evening in town, the cool kids turned out in droves for a traveling street-theatre piece. Like the rest of Brazil's northeastern states, Piauí has a well-deserved reputation for hospitality and friendliness, and I had a small local clique of my own soon after the show ended.

I met up with my new friends the next night at a reggae-*forró* fusion concert in a downtown cultural center. The show drew in much of the crowd from the previous day's performance, although the band had to compete for audience members with a *capoeira* festival in an adjacent building. On a *praça* across the street, a few dozen leather-jacket-clad teenagers passed bottles of cachaça and cans of beer around a giant speaker system blaring heavy metal songs in English. I was surprised not to see any police officers, but Teresina was doing a good job of living up to its reputation as a safe city. The different groups all seemed to flow into one another, and beyond a couple of small scuffles on the *praça*, I didn't get a sense of any tensions. I didn't worry, then, when three of my new friends decided to stay in front of the cultural center as the streets started to empty, sending text messages and arguing lackadaisically about the city's best bars.

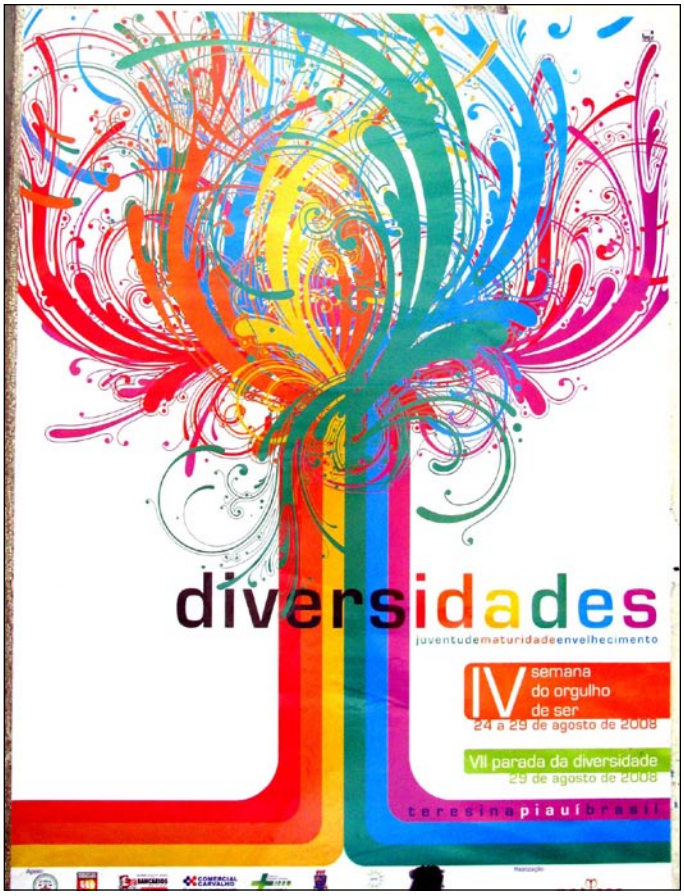
Six heavy-metal kids, all teenage boys in clothes that were trying a bit too hard to look ragged, shuffled over to us as we were finally getting ready to leave. They catcalled the two girls in our clique, who crossed the street to chat with a drink vendor, so then they started in on Allysson (a male university student) and me.

"Do you like emo?" a shaggy-haired kid in tight jeans asked us.

I'd heard about riots in Mexico directed against fans of emo, a British-American pop music genre that fuses punk rock instrumentals with angsty, soul-searching lyrics. I wasn't aware of any copycat cases in Brazil, though, and I'd assumed that any anti-emo sentiment in country would be restricted to São Paulo. Apparently, though, it's a contentious issue for bored adolescents in the *sertão*.

"I'm more into hip-hop," I said. I was getting a better look at the metalheads and I didn't like what I saw, especially the tall kid in the white t-shirt with "Let's Get Rid of Homosexuality" written on it. They turned to Allysson, who has a high voice and a stereotypically effeminate walk.

"Are you gay?" one of them asked. As Allysson began to answer, I saw one of the smaller members of the gang picking up some bricks from a pile on the newly reconstructed *praça.* I motioned for Allysson to follow me toward



A flyer advertising the publicly sponsored "Diversity Week" in downtown Teresina.

a nearby taxicab. Sure enough, once we turned our backs to the group, two bricks came crashing down a couple of feet from us. The one-sided confrontation didn't have a chance to escalate, though. Once our cab driver opened the window yell at the metalheads in a thick local accent littered with coarse, manly obscenities, they started to shuffle off. The girls got in another cab, and soon, we were laughing over drinks in a chique waterfront bar on the Poti River, one of several founded in the last decade.

By my second caipirinha, I'd mostly recovered from the would-be bashing. I kept thinking back to it, though, trying to understand its place in Piauí's unrelenting march into the 21st century. Homophobia has a long history throughout the northeast, where *cabra macho* ("male goat") culture encourages real men to drink and fight hard, and go after anything perceived as a threat to their masculinity or the social *status quo*. But the metalheads' language and attitudes struck me as alien to what I knew about Piauí. Head-banging to Ozzy Osbourne on the *praca* and obsessing over emo are both imported concerns.

When I made it to Teresina, I'd thought of Piauí's progress as intrinsically positive. I saw a more egalitarian society in the Teresina's newly tree-lined streets, in its gay rights posters, and publicly funded nightlife. My run-in with the metalheads reminded me that the new opportunities and ideas taking hold of Piauí don't necessarily guarantee an improvement for the state's residents. A transgender vice-

Invading the playground at a new restaurant in one of Teresina's rapidly expanding upper-class neighborhoods.

mayor in the interior doesn't guarantee safe streets in the capital, especially if kids there are using a new computer to download homophobic screeds on the internet. (A few months later, Allysson contacted me over Orkut — a wildly popular online networking service — to tell me he'd registered a hate crime complaint with the police. His willingness to go to the police, and his ease in doing so, is a testament to how times have changed in Piauí).

On my last morning in Teresina, as I wandered through the sweltering downtown, I heard a voice echoing over another of the city's central *praças*. From the tone, it sounded like a standard clothes or electronics sale. The message was significantly different, though. "This man is also a child of God," the voice said. "He needs your help. And you, being a child of God, will help him." The sound was coming from a couple of mid-sized speakers mounted on the bed of a blue pick-up truck. The "child of God," a large man, stood silently in front of the truck. His head was bowed, and his button-down shirt opened to reveal a tumor the size of an American football protruding from his belly. His panhandling wasn't going well. People stopped to stare, but most of us seemed to have a hard time with his pre-recorded pleas of desperation.

Piauí is moving into a future in which both the opportunities and challenges facing the state are greater than any that could have been imagined a generation ago. University enrollment — a hallmark of Lula's government — is on the rise; of my three new friends, two are students, and one is preparing for entrance exams. The state as a whole, and especially Teresina, is enjoying newfound wealth. But with this progress, Piauí is forced to confront social problems that have adapted, but not disappeared. Teresina's lively streets haven't done away with intolerance, although they seem to be updating old-time *cabra macho* culture with anti-emo violence. They haven't done away with the state's poverty, but they've created conditions in which some panhandlers beg by pickup truck while others still sleep in the street. Roberto Zottolo, the head of Philips Latin America, had it entirely wrong when he joked that no one would care if the state were to disappear. Piauí's future is inseparable from that the rest of the Northeast and the rest of Brazil. ❑

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