

Pride Celebrations

Mainstream or Radical? Gay or Queer?

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“As long as my people don’t have their rights across America, there’s no reason for celebration.” LGBTQ+ rights activist and trans drag artist Marsha P. Johnson may have uttered these words decades ago, but this message remains relevant to the discussion of Pride events today. The history of defiance from which Pride was born, and which Johnson helped propel, obviously contextualizes all Pride celebrations that followed it, but to what extent exactly does the past affect the present? And to what degree do the different modern-day conceptions of Pride denote the existence of different identity groups? Two main approaches to Pride celebrations have emerged, and they each have propelled different messages and have been led with different purposes. One is focused on a family-friendly and celebratory atmosphere, financed by corporate support, and accepted by mainstream society. While the other, based on the spirit of defiance, is defined by protest, kinkiness, and recognition of less accepted LGBTQ+ identities. The first approach consequently undermines the protest origins of Pride and pushes out those members of the community who are still fighting for their rights. These two camps represent different identities under the broader umbrella of Pride-celebrators: gay people being those who belong to the first camp and queer people belonging to the second. They are thus split by their attitudes toward heterosexual social norms, the conceptualization of their own homosexuality, and the question of capitalism which coincide with their respective conceptions of Pride.

While Pride events today vary greatly in structure, content, and intention, in the US they all have roots in the same history. This movement, though years in the making, reached a boiling point in the 1969 raid of the New York gay bar, the Stonewall Inn. Though such raids were common given the illegality of gay relationships in nearly every part of the country at the time, the LGBTQ+ community decided to resist this time and an uprising ensued. While many patrons were being

arrested and searched inside the bar, others were sent outside. When one woman was struck by an officer with a billy club, she called to those waiting on the street “Do something!” and the group jumped into action, headed by the transgender and cross-dressing women of color as well as the homeless gay youth who had been inside the bar.¹ The crowd began throwing pennies at the NYPD officers and, most famously, bottles and bricks too as they chanted “Gay Power! We shall overcome!” These chants and aggression led New York police officers to barricade themselves inside the bar.² It was not until protesters naturally dispersed by around 4:00 in the morning that the uprising came to an end.³

Though brief, the Stonewall Uprising galvanized LGBTQ+ people unlike anything before it. Thus, on the first anniversary of Stonewall, gay activists led by Craig Rodwell, Fred Sargeant, Ellen Broidy, Linda Rhodes, and Brenda Howard organized the first-ever Pride parade, called the Christopher Street Liberation March, in recognition of the catalyst that was Stonewall.⁴ The group met in Greenwich Village, the home of the Stonewall Inn, and began a trip that would span fifty New York city blocks and include several thousand protesters.⁵ Fred Segal, the marshal of the parade and a member of the Gay Liberation Front, summarized “The Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day March was as revolutionary and chaotic as everything we did that first year after the Stonewall riots. [It] was a reflection of us: out, loud and proud.”⁶ The march thus publicly demonstrated wide-scale collective pride for the first time. In that sense, both it and Stonewall created the perfect duet to give rise to a chorus of activism.

This context is not only relevant to current methods but incredibly interesting given the stark contrast between certain Pride camps today. That is to say, although they are all preceded by the same historical narrative, they have used that past to very different ends. In general, LGBTQ+ movements are rooted in the need to resist and subvert the oppression of traditional social and legal structures. However, this spirit of defiance is now much more present in some Pride events than others.

What will be referred to as Camp #1 in this paper is the less explicitly defiant approach to Pride celebrations today. While this style of celebration is more markedly different than the roots of Pride, it has become the most universally recognized. The rainbow, elaborate floats, corporate sponsors, and family-friendly activities define this approach. In that sense, most city Pride celebrations fit this description,

1 Garance Franke-Ruta, “An Amazing 1969 Account of the Stonewall Uprising,” *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/an-amazing-1969-account-of-the-stonewall-uprising/272467/>.

2 Sarah Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots? A Timeline of the 1969 Uprising,” *History*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/stonewall-riots-timeline>.

3 Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots?”

4 Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots?”

5 Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots?”

6 Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots?”

and the typical attendees, unassuming couples and families headed by same-sex couples, are its face. This approach then, while more divergent from the historical intention of resistance and protest, has many advantages.

The advantages of Camp #1 are baked into its description. For one, it understands the importance of visuals. The rainbow flags denote an innocent desire to display pride and diversity without making any demands of onlookers, and the inclusion of huge corporate sponsors not only provides these celebrations ethos but also reinforces them financially.⁷ Further, proponents of business involvement view LGBTQ+/Pride-related advertisement as a driver of change and a means of exposing larger groups to new terminology and minority identities.⁸ This corporate support, coupled with mainstream media coverage, not only makes these parades large-scale and accessible to the masses but also to non-LGBTQ+ people who may be interested in showing their allyship, exposing their children to Pride, or just doing something fun outside on a summer day. In other words, this style of Pride event is strategically unthreatening; it is designed to include whoever decides to attend and encourage them to revel in the joyousness of pride.

However, this universality and joyousness, along with the corporate element, are the very reason this style of Pride celebration is criticized. The corporatization of Pride, also known as rainbow capitalism or pinkwashing, is the ever growing practice amongst corporations of rainbow-ing their logos, offering verbal and/or financial support toward LGBTQ+ organizations or Pride events, and oftentimes branding their products to be “pride-y” or rainbow-colored, specifically during the month of June, Pride month. While Camp #1 may find this corporate support to be advantageous, others definitely do not. In fact, many find these gestures of solidarity to be void of any true intention toward inclusiveness, especially because they often coincide with Pride month and disappear right after.⁹ Gender and sexuality studies professor and LGBTQ+ activist Karen Tongson explains, “all we hope is for sustained attention and commitment from these corporations, organizations and anybody who expresses allyship beyond the month of June into perpetuity on our behalf.”¹⁰ That is to say, while money is helpful it means little if it is accompanied by only a brief, performative commitment to allyship. Further, Tongson points out “gestures of support, nice words, visible images of solidarity aren’t always enough. They’re often never enough, actually.”¹¹ The big questions

7 Thomas Roth and David Paisley, “Pride for Sale: Corporate Allies,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/opinions/pride-for-sale/>.

8 Roth and Paisley, “Pride for Sale: Corporate Allies.”

9 “Rainbow Capitalism Raises Questions about Corporate Commitments and Pride Month’s Purpose: Interview of Karen Tongson,” interview by Lisa Desjardins, *PBS NewsHour*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/rainbow-capitalism-raises-questions-about-corporate-commitments-and-pride-months-purposel>.

10 “Interview of Karen Tongson.”

11 “Interview of Karen Tongson.”

then, says journalist and consistent Pride attender John Paul Brammer, are “Should it be a protest, or a party? Should we really let a weapons manufacturer slap a rainbow over their logo and march in the parade?”¹²

The disputed sincerity of business involvement directly relates to the fundamental question of what Pride should be. While Camp #1’s events are based on joyousness and a party atmosphere with corporate support, some wonder if the protest element has all but disappeared from its intended place in Pride and if so, what effects that has on its legitimacy. That is to say, if what once began as brick-throwing and marching is now carnival games, rainbow cotton candy, and Old Navy sponsorships, has Pride lost its real purpose? Now that resistance is no longer as necessary to the mainstream Pride celebration, the spirit of defiance burns out and, as activist and filmmaker Leo Herrera warns, “As more conservative or traditional factions within the movement achieve their goals (i.e. marriage, military service, etc.) it sometimes can feel the more vulnerable in our community . . . can be left behind.”¹³

Camp #1 is therefore further criticized for pushing so hard toward inclusivity and universality that it actually excludes the most vulnerable and fringe members of the LGBTQ+ community. That is to say, all of the aforementioned elements may actually be pushing LGBTQ+ people out of Pride. For one, making an event originally intended for a minority group into a mainstream celebration inevitably discourages those who have yet to see mainstream acceptance—e.g. trans or gender non-conforming people, LGBTQ+ people of color, disabled individuals, crossdressers and drag artists, and other kink and fetish celebrators—from attending. Further, these individuals who remain outside of mainstream society have every reason to continue resisting and protesting for their rights, but Camp #1’s approach to Pride does not tend to accommodate that.

Another facet of the issue is that even if Camp #1 did gear itself toward these lesser-known factions of the LGBTQ+ community within its events, they would often remain inaccessible. That is to say, every other issue with Camp #1’s conception of Pride is “just the rainbow veneer on the Wells Fargo float” because at their core these events have become so expensive that people are being completely priced out of attendance.¹⁴ John Paul Brammer provides Los Angeles as an example of this price gouging: a city which in 2016 eliminated its free ticket option and instead priced tickets at \$35 apiece.¹⁵ In New York City, the parade is still free, at least as of 2021, but the other Pride events require a PrideFest VIP ticket which cost \$50 apiece.¹⁶ Prices this exorbitant, whether intentionally or not, dictate who can

12 John Paul Brammer, “Pride for Sale: Priced Out,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/opinions/pride-for-sale/>.

13 Leo Herrera quoted in “Has ‘Rainbow Capitalism’ Taken Over Pride?,” *WWD*, June 25, 2021, <https://advance-lexis-com.cacheproxy.lakeforest.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:630M-1801-DXFS-23CF-00000-00&context=1516831>.

14 Brammer, “Priced Out.”

15 Brammer, “Priced Out.”

16 Brammer, “Priced Out.”

attend Pride events. So although the events have become mainstream, they actually lack true accessibility for lower-class LGBTQ+ folks. As Brammer points out, the corporations who sponsor these events are focused on profit, “so they center the affluent minority of LGBTQ people, who skew white, gay and male.”¹⁷ Thus, this creates a monolithic display of Pride and leaving many people on the other side of the gate, oftentimes those who would most benefit from a chance at inclusion.

There is a clear pattern in this camp’s demands though - having been all but achieved as of now - which is that they request rights and treatment that correspond with heterosexual social norms. An obvious example of this pattern is the movement toward gay marriage. Gay marriage, though not directly achieved through Pride, was certainly propelled by it. How could these mainstream PG Pride celebrations advocate for this right though? It was something their business donors and heterosexual onlookers could get behind.¹⁸ Equality in marriage, a socially accepted and markedly innocent contract of love, is something straight people can intuitively understand. It is also always easier to ask someone to alter their rules rather than rewrite them, so when gay people asked to participate in an already codified legal right, they were eventually let in. Now, Camp #1’s Pride celebrators revel in the fact that they are able to live and act just as straight people do and view this ability as the mark of acceptance. Their pleas to participate in heterosexual social conventions foster acceptance of their gayness and also further entrench those conventions.

In what can be interpreted simultaneously as an act of recognition of Pride’s origins and a response to the problems with Camp #1’s approach, Camp #2’s conception of Pride is quite distinct. Camp #1’s loafer-clad families are replaced with ball gags, leather suits, and most notably, an air of defiance. This style of Pride rejects corporate involvement and the notion that business money is the only means of financing a strong event. In so doing, Camp #2’s Pride events rely on grassroots efforts to organize, which is feasible given their completely different notion of what a Pride event should be. In this more radical construction, protest and politics are central. Signs and chants commonly echo similar themes: “Queer liberation not rainbow capitalism!” and “there are no queer friendly cops!”¹⁹ These ideals reflect the values of this camp which, among other things, rejects police presence at or in their marches - marches being the keyword in relation to Camp #2 which doesn’t support notions of raucous celebration when there is still so much work to be done - especially in support of the more vulnerable, fringe LGBTQ+ subgroups.²⁰

The inclusion of less socially accepted groups is, of course, another defining element of this approach to Pride, and centering these groups is a means of protest in

17 Brammer, “Priced Out.”

18 Alex Abad-Santos, “The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained,” *Vox*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22463879/kink-at-pride-discourse-lgbtq>.

19 Abad-Santos, “The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained.”

20 Abad-Santos, “The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained.”

itself. In fact, these organizers find focusing on optics and respectability politics to inevitably mean compromising their identities for recognition that they don't even desire.²¹ Rather, they find queer history to be central to their fight, and because that history is centered on resisting social norms and embracing radicalism that is exactly what they do. This style of Pride event, while principally militant and resistant, also becomes a haven for lesser-known and less widely accepted identities; that is, everyone Camp #1 leaves behind.²²

Just as Camp #2 rejects the mainstream, they also reject the concept of acceptance. For that reason, Camp #2's members are better defined as queer.²³ LGBTQ+ Philosophy professor Robin Dembroff perfectly describes this idea:

"Queerness isn't just about who you want to fuck, you know? Being queer is still fundamentally rooted in having a political resistance to hegemonic ideas of how humans ought to be, and it's about whether or not you're an 'acceptable' human."²⁴

In summary, just as Camp #2's conception of Pride is inherently political, so too are their identities. They are not concerned with being accepted by mainstream, straight society and indeed, would rather not be. This mindset also clearly applies to their perspective on economics. Camp #2 members see corporate partnerships as selling out and thus see greed, corporatization, and exorbitant wealth outside of Pride as unjust too.²⁵ Particularly because they are advocating for the most vulnerable in their communities, they are often communist or socialist-allied and view wealth redistribution and societal reconstruction with the goal of economic equality as inherently connected to their fight for queer liberation.²⁶

Queer people in Camp #2 also resist heterosexual social norms. They do not want or need their events to foster a spirit of comradery with the straight community; they don't care for corporate partnership, and they are certainly not interested in traditional marriage. As drag queen and musician Trixie Mattel summarizes in one of her YouTube videos, "we get to be these, like, weird, fringe of society, straddling the world of reality and non-reality - no one expects us to get married, no one expects us to have kids, we just get to be creative and laugh and drink."²⁷ There is a spirit of celebration and freedom, not in being allowed into straight social systems, but in subverting them completely. In sum, queer people consistently pursue liberation because they have no desire to be confined to normalcy.

21 Abad-Santos, "The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained."

22 Abad-Santos, "The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained."

23 Abad-Santos, "The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained."

24 Robin Dembroff quoted in Alex Abad-Santos, "The Perpetual Discourse Over LGBTQ Pride, Explained."

25 "Has 'Rainbow Capitalism' Taken Over Pride?"

26 "Has 'Rainbow Capitalism' Taken Over Pride?"

27 Trixie Mattel in Sarah Schauer, "Would You Rather feat. Trixie Mattel," February 24, 2021, YouTube video, 16:14, <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=qM8CAdGEAUk&t=271s>.

After an exploration of both Camp #1 and Camp #2, it is likely clear what the former's critique of the latter might be. For one, more mainstream Pride celebrators view kinky, defiant marches like Camp #2's as being non-inclusive of heterosexual and more mainstream LGBTQ+ crowds. In fact, they believe such events might reverse the trends toward acceptance that they find themselves contributing to through their family-friendly, digestible celebrations. They argue that socially deviant events mean children are not welcome and are thus not exposed to conceptions of Pride and lose access to a potential learning opportunity, though Camp #2 would argue teaching was never Pride's intended purpose.²⁸ Mostly though, Camp #1, which believes Pride can be a vehicle for spreading joy, is confused by the other's insistence on often somber defiance.

The approaches of Camp #1 and Camp #2 are clearly indicative of a repeated pattern in history. Indeed, the mainstream faction versus the more radical one is a tale as old as time and defines nearly all notable social movements - the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for women's suffrage, and defunding versus reforming the police, to name a few. So, while ideas about Pride and the questions they stir up about identity are incredibly unique, the pattern of division amongst members is not. That being said, there is a distinctive pattern at play in this case in that conceptions of Pride correspond to different conceptions of gayness and queerness, respectively. That is to say, Pride is the umbrella under which pride-celebrators diverge into different identity groups.

28 "Has 'Rainbow Capitalism' Taken Over Pride?"