

Conceptualising queer activist critiques of Pride in the Two-Thirds World: Queer activism and alternative Pride organising in South Africa, Mumbai, Hong Kong and Shanghai

Sexualities

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Abstract

This article explores queer critiques of LGBT Pride in the ‘Two-Thirds World’, drawing from ethnographic data, focussing on under-researched contexts and analysing common and divergent themes in queer critiques of Pride globally. Criticisms of corporate involvement and capitalist appropriation of Pride are replicated in the case studies; there is also a complex politics of necessity, precarity, and pragmatism. ‘Mainstream’ Prides reflect and can exacerbate racial and class divisions and be a well-rewarded career path for its organisers. The article analyses the radical politics of ‘alternative’ queer Prides and argues for the importance of continually tracing the ideological impacts of Pride, engaging with the dynamics of global capitalism, and highlighting the struggles of queer grassroots activists.

Keywords

Homocapitalism, LGBT rights, pride, queer activism, social movements

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We call for a Pride that is a microcosm of the society we wish to live in, and not a mirror of the divided one that we currently live in. We wish Pride to be a space that all can access, where all can be free, and where every voice is important Manifesto of Johannesburg People's Pride (Johannesburg People's, 2013)

As new Pride events continue to emerge across the world and are extolled as key moments in a country's LGBTQ+ rights progress (Ayoub et al., 2021), so have queer critiques of Pride in many of these contexts. In recent years, the organisation of what can be considered as 'alternative', 'counter' or 'rival' Prides has occurred because of the perceived exclusions and marginalisation of certain groups at 'mainstream'¹ Pride events. These 'alternative' Prides include UK Black Pride, Trans Pride and the New York Queer Liberation March (McCartan and Nash, 2022). A key point of contention in these alternative Prides is the reclamation of queer protest, queer commitments to social justice and political radicalism. What constitutes 'queer' and 'queer activism' is complex. As this article will demonstrate, queer activists can also be Pride organisers, but their queerness is rooted in their desire to reject the 'respectability politics' (Ward, 2008) of the broader LGBT rights movement, and a wish to replace equal rights discourses with a 'celebration of difference and challenge to normative social relations' (Brown, 2015: 73). Despite controversy about the purpose and organisation of Pride, including debates about the balance between celebration and protest, inclusivity and marginalisation, and the relationship with state and commercial institutions, recent academic analyses of Pride have mostly either overlooked or minimised queer critiques of Pride (Bruce, 2016; Peterson et al, 2018). This article aims to address this gap in academic engagement with queer critiques of Pride by drawing from new ethnographic data, focussing on under-researched contexts and exploring the extent to which there are common and divergent themes in queer critiques, protests and organising of alternative Prides internationally, with a particular focus on selected case studies from across the 'Two-Thirds World', which is a categorisation that seeks to conceptualise privilege and precarity, dominance and marginalisation, free from geographical and national space (Mohanty, 2003: 505).

Drawing from case studies in South Africa, Mumbai, Hong Kong and Shanghai, this article explores how queer activists take up the struggles of the Two-Thirds World at Pride events. Homosexuality is legal in these contexts, but there are varying levels of positive legal protections and societal acceptance. These case studies all demonstrate a complex interplay of socio-political tensions, racial and class divisions, with sharp socio-economic inequalities and ideological disagreements between LGBT and queer activists. Pride events are key sites for these tensions to be expressed and debated, with either protests at 'mainstream' Prides, or the organisation of 'alternative' grassroots Prides by queer activists. Analysing socio-political tensions and ideological differences between LGBTQ+ activists using a One-Third/Two-Thirds world lens is useful because this 'nonessentialist' category moves away from the geographical distinctions of Global North and South and accepts that privilege and precarity, dominance and marginalisation can exist side by side in the same geographical and national spaces (Mohanty, 2003: 505). South Africa, India and Hong Kong are marked by sharp differences in standards of living between privileged social elites/minorities and social majorities. In these contexts, Pride reflects and reproduces these socio-economic divides and is also a site for their contestation (Conway 2022, 2023).

Analysis of queer activism has mostly focused on activist groups outside of the Pride movement, such as on the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) established in the US in the 1980s, and also focusing on broader queer critiques of the mainstream LGBT movement and politics (Brown, 2007; Schulman, 2021). The queer activists highlighted in this article, like ACT UP activists before them, combine the focus on sexuality with anti-capitalist critiques of big business, intersectional demands for social justice and an open celebration of sex and sexuality (Highleyman, 2002; Brown, 2007: 268; Schulman, 2021). The overarching critique by of Pride worldwide levelled by queer critics is Pride's utility for and complicity with global capitalism. The involvement of corporate sponsors and attendees is considered by these critics to have deradicalized Pride's political purpose, conforming to homonormative and 'respectable' modes of LGBT identity, including same-sex marriage, and a relentless positivity about the inevitability of progress and/or celebrating the total achievement of rights for LGBT communities, which belies the real struggles and marginalisation of queer communities (Tatchell, 2019).

Tracing how queer critiques of Pride are constituted and expressed in the Two-Thirds World, broadens our understanding of contemporary queer activism and Pride as an international activist praxis. While there are commonalities between Pride events across the world and in tropes of queer criticism, Pride varies considerably according to local political and legal conditions. Queer engagement with and attitudes towards Pride can also differ across contexts. Catch-all statements about Pride, its purposes, and flaws, should therefore be avoided and rather, Pride and queer activism at and against Pride should be conceptualised with nuance and complexity.

The article begins by exploring the history and purposes of Pride, before mapping out key contentions by queer critics of Pride. The article then thematises queer responses to Pride expressed in the Two-Thirds World. Protesting the racial and class exclusions of 'mainstream Prides' and/or seeking to organise alternative Prides is a common theme across the case studies. Tied to this is the perceived class and/or racial privilege of 'mainstream' Pride organisers and a concomitant apoliticism of these organisers. The organisation of 'alternative' Prides seeks to reclaim the queer radicalism of Pride, hold 'marches', rather than parades, occupy spaces of threat, rather than safety, and articulate and highlight social justice issues, such as precarity and marginality, rather than exclusively celebrating progress. Above all, the article focuses on Pride as the site of struggle in contemporary 'global homocapitalism' (Rao, 2020) and a place where the emergence of a professionalised, highly visible, global elite of LGBT advocates or 'career queers' can be evidenced (Burchiellaro, 2023; Rodriguez, 2022). Finally, the article explores how queer activists believe Pride can, is, or should be, a meaningful and transformative platform. The article concludes that tempering the dominance and exclusive focus on the narratives of progress and celebration and connecting Pride with grassroots issues of precarity, injustice and vulnerability is an urgent and necessary task.

The purposes and politics of Pride

Since the 1970s, Pride parades across North America, Europe and elsewhere have occupied urban spaces aiming to reclaim and rework public space for marginalised LGBT

subjects, help forge collective identities and, both individually and collectively, ‘come out’ as LGBT, shaping and reframing public discourses about sex and sexuality (Browne, 2007; Johnston, 2005). Today, Pride events take place in over 250 cities and towns across the world and have become major sites for corporate advertising, shaping and projecting city and state identities and showcasing institutional diversity politics (Ward, 2003, 2008). As Pride has grown in scale, tensions over the balance between protest and celebration, conformity or confrontation, have become acute. Queer criticism and protest against Pride has focused on a range of broad issues and specific controversies including opposition to the involvement of oppressive and violent state institutions, such as the police and military (Holmes, 2017; Rossdale, 2019), the use of Pride by foreign states to ‘pinkwash’ their international reputations either by sponsorship of Pride events, involvement in the parade, or putting pressure on organisers to ban critics from marching (Schulman, 2012), organising Pride events that exclude people of colour, the disabled, immigrants or the economically marginalised and above all, the commercialisation of Pride through corporate sponsorship and involvement in the parade is a key criticism (Schulman, 2012; Ward, 2008). The LGBT activist Peter Tatchell summarises broader queer activist criticisms of Pride in the Global North when he argues that ‘Pride is now capitalism with a pink hue’ (Tatchell, 2019). While academic analyses focused specifically on Pride have tended to eschew or minimise queer activist criticisms (see, Browne 2007; Bruce 2016; Peterson et al, 2018), a broader academic literature on contemporary LGBT identities, organising and activism does consider the encroachment and co-optation of LGBT life, identities and activism by neoliberal capitalism and institutional diversity politics as major challenges with radically undermining ideological effects (Burchiellaro, 2023; Duggan, 2004; Rao, 2020; Ward, 2008). The imperatives of capitalism have led to the professionalisation and monetisation of Pride organising in many contexts (Schulman 2012; Ward 2008) and the effects of capitalism on LGBTQ+ organising in the Global South have been well documented (Conway, 2022; Rao 2020; Rodriguez 2022; Roy 2022). Contemporary capitalism is an ‘urgent locus of struggle’ (Mohanty, 2003: 509), for anti-racist, feminist and queer activists across the world (Burchiellaro 2023; Conway 2022; Eschle and Manguashca 2007; Mohanty, 2003; Rao, 2020; Schulman, 2021). Academic analyses of Pride are remiss if they do not consider the ideological effects of capitalism on Pride and discourses of Pride.

Writing about the professionalisation of LGBT advocacy in 1990s Los Angeles that saw working-class people of colour replaced as Los Angeles Pride organisers by middle-class white professionals, Ward states that Pride has become:

Many seemingly contradictory things at once: disco parties; arts and crafts fairs; drug dens; health expos; high security cages (many events are surrounded by chain-link fence or other barriers); sites of mourning; sites of protest; ecstatic fun; and utter boredom (2003: 88).

As a consequence, Ward (2003: 89) argues that there has been a ‘disconnection between [Pride] and any sort of well-articulated political ideology, particularly a radical, grassroots ideology’ and that there is little need for Pride organisers to engage with LGBT identities or movement building. Schulman adds to this claim by arguing that the co-

optation of LGBT activism and advocacy by elites and corporate interests, is not so much an absence of ideology than a ‘gentrification’ of activism and imaginaries of LGBT identities; one that supplants consideration of marginalised communities and questions of social justice and liberation, with neoliberal, individualised logics and a politics of whiteness (Schulman, 2013). For Schulman, the LGBT community has ‘doomed’ itself by believing state, or corporate, funding is essential in order to deliver large-scale Pride events with security personnel, fences, professional organisers and after-parties, all factors that were ‘choices’ made by Pride organisers (Schulman, 2012: 119). These choices, according to Schulman, are rooted in the gentrified mindsets of organisers and the repudiation of the queer politics of their forebears (Schulman, 2013). For Rao (2015: 44), considering ‘choices’ made by LGBT activists overplays the agency activists have in the structural conditions of neoliberalism. Essentially, these ‘choices’ take place within the commercial massification of Pride that reflect the LGBTQ+ community’s ‘folding into capitalism’ (Rao, 2015: 43). If Pride has been enmeshed with neoliberal capitalism, this poses the question of what purpose or utility Pride plays in contemporary LGBT organising and campaigning.

The places and spaces in which Pride takes place can reflect considerable ideological differences and attitudes towards corporate support and involvement in Pride. South Africa’s significant socio-economic divisions have led to ‘rival Prides’ in Johannesburg and Cape Town that take place in the historically privileged [white] and historically disadvantaged [black] areas. These separate Prides have different levels of resource, visibility and aims. Johannesburg Pride takes place in a luxury shopping mall in Africa’s wealthiest suburb, Cape Town Pride takes place in a gentrified, LGBT district and tourist hot spot in the city. In Cape Town, Khumbulani Pride takes place in the predominantly black townships, distant from the gentrified city centre and with some of the highest rates of violence and social deprivation in South Africa. As will be discussed below, Soweto Pride emerged out of black queer activist protests at Joburg Pride in 2012. Alongside protests about Pride’s location, activists also protested Joburg Pride ignoring the issues of homophobic violence and socio-economic inequality for the black majority. In Hong Kong, socio-economic and racial divisions are also evident in the territory’s LGBT events with well-sponsored events such as Pink Dot and Pink Season attracting a large, mostly professional and expatriate attendees. The locally organised Hong Kong Pride attracts mostly Cantonese, and many working-class participants. Hong Kong Migrants Pride is organised for the territory’s migrant domestic workers who have precarious employment and visa conditions. Pride in South Africa and Hong Kong reflect and exacerbates socio-economic divisions and have very different relationships with and attitudes towards capitalism.

Academic research has primarily focused on Pride events in the Global North and West with scant focus on Pride events in the Global South. The emerging literature on Pride in South Africa, Hong Kong, India and Shanghai all point to how the organisation, location and representations at mainstream Pride events reflect and exacerbate underlying socio-political divisions and are a focus for queer contestation and protest. Matebeni’s (2018) work argues that although multiple Prides are held across South Africa and the country is an international role model for LGBT legal rights, Pride in Johannesburg and Cape Town

is the focus, and cause, of bitter race, class and gender divisions. The 2012 protests at Joburg Pride by black queer activists led to the holding of ‘alternative’ grassroots Pride events across the city and region (Conway, 2022). Conway (2022) argues that Johannesburg Pride’s efforts to broaden and become more inclusive have mostly failed and conform to the broader neoliberalization and ‘lifestylization’ of LGBT identities and issues. In Hong Kong, Pride is organised by mostly working-class Cantonese activists who have close ties with the pro-democracy movement in the territory and Hong Kong Migrants Pride is organised by marginalised and precarious migrant domestic workers who use Pride to make political and legal demands of the territory’s authorities and to critique the global economic conditions that lead to exploitative migrant labour (Conway, 2023). LGBTQ+ advocacy and organising in Hong Kong is split along ethnic, national and class lines, with privileged international migrants opting for ‘apolitical’ and non-confrontational events such as Pink Dot. In Shanghai, Pride was organised for over 10 years and took a politically cautious and non-confrontational approach. Shanghai Pride had been critiqued for being organised by professional immigrants and by internationally educated, middle-class Chinese (Bao 2011). Despite this cautious approach, Pride was discontinued in 2021 because of increased harassment from the security services. Mumbai Pride is the largest Pride in India and is organised by the Humsafar Trust. The chairperson of Mumbai Pride, Ashok Row Kavi, is a supporter of the right-wing BJP party government and has been described as a ‘homoHindunationalist’ who is ‘openly casteist’ and Islamophobic (Urdhyay, 2020: 472). In these four contexts, Pride has been a focus of controversy and contestation and queer activists have protested at Pride, but also organised alternative, grassroots Pride events.

Methods

This research draws from extensive ethnographic fieldwork at Pride events across field-sites in South Africa, Asia and North America. Between 2018 and 2023, I attended Pride events including parades, conferences, workshops, film screenings and protests in South Africa, Hong Kong, China, India and North America. I interviewed over 100 Pride organisers, activists, diplomats, journalists and queer critics. I was interested in how and why organisers and activists became involved in Pride, what Pride meant to them and what they thought they had achieved. I took a close interest in any evidence of tension and difference between the organisers of Pride and the participants. I was interested in why queer activists were critical, what Pride meant and how they organise (or would organise) Pride differently. As an LGBT-identifying researcher, participants responded readily to requests for access, and interviews often combined gathering information with discussing and sharing perspectives on and experiences of Pride and LGBTQ+ rights locally and elsewhere. This article draws from interview data from 10 interviewees with Pride organisers and queer activists who were expressly critical of ‘mainstream’ Prides, as well as from broader conversations and observations collected in field notes. In many cases, the lines between Pride organising and queer activism were blurred. This was because unlike major Pride events in the One-Third World, other Pride parades, marches and events were

often organised by volunteers, had expressly queer purposes and allowed anyone to join the parade, or march.

To collate and analyse this large body of data, I used NVivo to collect and code the interviews. Although coding was open, I had collected data from queer critics of 'mainstream' Pride in New York and used this data to establish categories that were used to compare data from the Two-Thirds World. I iteratively coded using existing themes/issues and tensions evident in the New York queer activists, including over-commercialisation, state involvement, divisions and exclusions focused on race, gender and class, and then looked for other issues that were evident. I used memos to iteratively code and compare queer activist critiques and Pride organisers justifications or responses to these critiques.

Race & class and the (A)-politics of Pride

Accusations that Pride can enact forms of racism and class exclusion have become commonplace across Europe and North America (Walcott 2017; White 2021). This was also a widespread criticism of mainstream Pride events in South Africa. 'Racism in this country is still so strong and it's embedded in every department of life', remarked Sindiswa Thafeni, the organiser of Khumbulani Pride in Cape Town. 'We really didn't want division between us and Cape Town Pride', she continued, 'but there is division and the division has the race card in it'. Sindiswe identified the 'blackness' of Khumbulani Pride as the reason why it had not attracted municipal funding, whereas the 'whiter' Cape Town Pride was routinely funded by the city authorities and corporations. In Johannesburg, Ntsupe Mohapi, the co-organiser of Ekurhuleni Pride, also believed that race was at the root of division between Johannesburg Pride and other Pride events across the city: 'It is racism because Joburg Pride is too white. When you go there as blacks...they have their own place where they sit together as whites. Then we have our own place where we sit together as black people'. The deep and traumatic legacy of racial, spatial and socio-economic division in South Africa continue to be expressed at mainstream Pride.

Racial divisions at Pride also intersected with class. Jade Madingwane, an organiser of Soweto Pride, remarked 'there are lesbians that have money and then there's us. The "us" would be the black lesbians who are doing political work more than the white lesbians who are just corporate' and are part of a wealthy, 'apolitical' elite. In Hong Kong, the divide between local, working-class Cantonese and expatriate professionals reflected racial, class and ideological divisions. Wylie Yeo, from Hong Kong Pride, explained that 'I think the needs of LGBT Hong Kong are very different, because for the expat community, I think the visa rights are very important to them...But for the majority of local LGBT people, we cannot benefit from this change at all'. When conducting fieldwork in Hong Kong, expatriate LGBT advocates all commented that they had little contact with or awareness of the work the Cantonese organisers of Hong Kong Pride. I was asked by a prominent (and expatriate) human rights advocate in the territory to help facilitate a meeting between him and the organisers of Hong Kong Pride. When I spoke to the organising committee of Hong Kong Pride, they responded that they had met him 'around his big board room table' and that it was 'interesting that he does not remember

meeting with us!'. Racial and class divisions define South African and Hong Kong society and Pride events in those contexts can either reflect and enable such divisions, or highlight, contest and seek to change them.

The class privilege of Pride organisers was also criticised by queer activists and cited as the reason for the perceived apoliticism of 'mainstream' Pride events. Mumbai Pride, the largest Pride event in India, is organised by the Humsafar Trust, the leadership of which was consistently criticised by queer activist for being upper-caste, predominantly cis-gendered male and for openly supporting the ruling Hindu-Nationalist BJP Party. In response to these criticisms, Ankit Bhuptani, the organiser of Mumbai Pride complained about the 'politicisation' of Pride by queer activists in the parade:

Lesbian groups making slogans against the ruling party [the BJP], that is something we don't appreciate in Mumbai Pride!...Don't mix everything at once! Queer people, especially on the left, are so keen to talk about these issues...They're using Pride as a vehicle.

One of the groups that had protested at and against Mumbai Pride were the students from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Queer Collective. The Queer Collective believed Bhuptani's criticism of politicisation was borne out of the upper class/upper-caste privilege of Mumbai Pride's organisers. 'The moment you say apolitical, that is your privilege that is talking...I do not have this privilege of being apolitical. It is a political statement to say "I am apolitical"' said a member of the collective. Another member of the collective continued that 'the whole Pride narrative in India only focuses on the upper-caste narrative, the cis-gendered, middle-class narrative of coming out, accepting yourself and there's no diversity in how queerness is experienced'. For the members of the Queer Collective, the marginalisation and erasure of Dalit (lower caste) people and their struggles from Mumbai Pride was the result of the (a) political aims of the Pride organisers. During the march in 2019, the TISS Queer Collective carried banners protesting for Trans rights in India, against the BJP party government, against the privatisation of public services and against gender-based violence. The following year, 50 queer activists were arrested, and it was rumoured that the detainees details had been given to the police by the organisers of Mumbai Pride (Wire, 2020). In 2022, open divisions between queer activists and the organisers of Mumbai Pride contributed to Mumbai Pride being cancelled that year. Class and race-based exclusion and the perceived apoliticism of Pride have provoked major divisions and the disruption of Pride events across the world.

The class privilege of Pride organisers relates to a broader critique of LGBT advocacy, the 'NGO-ization' (Choudry and Kapoor, 2012) of LGBT activism and the privileges it can bestow on a global elite of LGBT advocates. Rodriguez terms this new global elite the 'career queers' and by this they mean individuals who have 'created successful careers from queer activism' (Rodriguez, 2022: 83). Such 'career queers' are 'more likely to approach activism as a form of business' and 'they are less likely to situate the activism in the perspective of a community' (Rodriguez, 2022: 83). The evolution of Pride organising and LGBT advocacy as a profitable and high-profile career option (for some) has, in the view of many queer activists, led to the marginalisation of radical politics and the mainstreaming of 'homonormative' complicity, much in the same terms as discussed

above. 'It's quite scary these people are making careers out of queer identity. They work in NGOs...they hold power', said a member of the Mumbai TISS Queer Collective. One of the Collective recalled an encounter with a well-known gay business executive at Mumbai Pride: 'he stopped me and said "Can you say something to me for my podcast?" I said "No!" He said "Can't you just say, 'It gets better!' It's only three words". I said "No!" It is everything they are about. Just this positive message that appeals to the Global North'. The Collective believed that the 'simplistic' and 'positive' framing of Mumbai Pride around celebration of the recent decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, rather than protest about social and political issues was why the organisers of Mumbai Pride had been successful in gaining diplomatic and corporate funding and broader international recognition and why queer activists were unfunded and marginalised.

The Pride organising committee in Ekurhuleni, South Africa and Hong Kong were unpaid volunteers and although Soweto Pride was organised by the salaried staff at an NGO, the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), FEW struggled for funding and in some months had barely been able to fund their payroll. For Jade Madingwane, the root of this struggle was the fact that FEW was run by black lesbians, and she explained 'we call funders, we call to people but they have no confidence solely on the fact that it [Soweto Pride] is organised by black women'. While attending a reception to celebrate LGBT inclusion at a major bank in Hong Kong, a diversity and inclusion professional, who led the bank's LGBT staff group, told me that he had been 'embarrassed' when watching the organisers of Hong Kong Pride struggling to use PowerPoint software during a pitch for funding and by their 'limited' English language ability. It was no surprise to him that they struggled to find sponsors and he believed they needed 'training in professional skills'. Class privilege, race, homonormative 'positive' messaging all serve to exclude grassroots Pride organisers from becoming part of a visible, rewarded and well-travelled global elite of LGBT 'career queers'.

Most Prides hold parades, but in Soweto, Ekurhuleni, Khumbulani and Hong Kong, Pride has a march, not a parade. 'We call it a march because we are radical on the streets', said Jade from Soweto Pride, 'we are much angrier because of the violence that we experience within our own communities. Our anger is justified because just being in Soweto on its own is dangerous for a woman, let alone an LGBTI identifying person'. The location and route of the march was also significant. Many of the organisers of Soweto Pride had protested against Joburg Pride in 2012 when it was held in the affluent and predominantly white neighbourhood of Rosebank: 'We were having a parade in an area where there were high walls. If you are having a parade in an area where no-one is going to see you, what is the point of even having that parade?' said Jade. The other organisers of Soweto Pride added,

Pride is not about the festival that happens after. Us occupying the space is the reason we have Pride... We are occupying these communities and saying that we want to eradicate the notion that we cannot exist. We want to eradicate the notion that we are un-African, we want to eradicate the notion that we are individuals and not a collective.

Khumbulani Pride and Ekurhuleni Pride changed location each year, often choosing locations where there had been a recent homophobic attack or murder. Marching through the streets of that area aimed to ‘engage the community and raise awareness about LGBTI’ (Ntsupe Mohapi). Marching, rather than holding a parade, occupying space and choosing spaces that were dangerous, rather than safe, for LGBTQ+ people, were conscious decisions and part of the queer political purpose of Pride.

Queer activists who protest against mainstream Prides and/or organise alternative Prides essentially aim to ‘return Pride to being active political protests against mainstream gender and sexual norms instead of merely celebrating ‘progress’ (McCartan and Nash, 2022: 775). In South Africa, these alternative Prides expressly sought to reclaim queer politics and continue the legacies of the radicalism of the South African Liberation Struggle. ‘I think what Simon Nkoli² was fighting for back in the days is what Soweto Pride is currently doing’, explained Jade. Jade also believed that Soweto Pride was reclaiming the original political purposes of Pride:

How do we protect, how do we educate, and how do we grasp that history of where Pride started, because we’ve lost it. Somewhere along the way, Pride has become a party. We’ve lost that ethical purpose. It’s where we get to mourn and celebrate our lost loved ones.

During the Soweto Pride march participants carried pictures of black lesbians who had been murdered and staged a ‘die in’ to commemorate their deaths. ‘What is the face of a rape survivor?’ said Zandile as she walked in the march, ‘It’s a black woman. And when you are black and you live in a township and you come out as a lesbian, then you are a number one target’. Highlighting the reality of the threats and challenges of LGBT communities in Soweto and other townships across South Africa was at the heart of Soweto Pride’s queer political purpose.

Resisting, subverting and requiring corporate support for Pride

The most prevalent theme raised by queer activists across the field sites and in common with queer critics of Pride in the One-Third World, was criticism and resistance to commercial sponsorship of Pride, a critique of the exploitative and unequal dynamics of capitalism and an identification of the inconsistent positions’ corporations can take in relation to LGBT rights. However, for Pride organisers in the Two-Thirds World, there was a pragmatic acknowledgement of the need for money in circumstances where state support was limited or non-existent. In Shanghai, Pride organisers believed that framing LGBT advocacy as good ‘business sense’ could gain the attention of policy makers whereas demands for LGBT rights as human rights discourses would be ineffective and/or provoke sanctions from the authorities. As will be discussed below, these ‘pragmatic’ approaches for corporate money and support did not always lead to success and this provoked further critiques of capitalism from activists.

Johannesburg Pride takes place in a luxury shopping mall in Africa’s wealthiest suburb and receives corporate sponsorship from numerous transnational and local companies including Levis, Bacardi, EY and Vodacom. Jade Madingwane, a co-organiser of Soweto

Pride, was critical of corporate sponsorship of Pride: ‘When we talk about corporates... we are just like, “Oh, but you are taking away from the poor.”... So, we were not on the same page [as Johannesburg Pride] and hence we said, “Okay, let us just not [allow corporates to be involved]”’. In Hong Kong, Migrants Pride articulated a strong critique of global capitalism with activists carrying banners saying migrant domestic work is ‘modern day slavery’ and as one of the organisers told the rally afterwards, migrants were ‘forced to migrate because of poverty’ articulating the belief that migrants from the Two-Thirds World had few options but to migrate to Hong Kong on unjust and unequal terms (Conway, 2023). Unlike professional LGBT migrants in Hong Kong, LGBT migrant domestic workers have no positive legal protections and can be dismissed for being LGBT and then deported. Migrants Pride took place amidst the designer shopping malls and corporate skyscrapers in central Hong Kong, but it eschewed sponsorship and was sharply critical of the role of transnational corporations and global capitalism.

Despite these clear critiques of Pride’s complicity with capitalism, grassroots LGBTQ+ activists across Two-Thirds World, face what Moreau and Currier have termed a ‘queer dilemma’ (2018). In a context of either homophobic, indifferent, or unreliable governments, there are scarce resources for LGBT civil society and any potential source of funding is difficult to refuse. ‘Alternative’ Pride organisers in South Africa and Hong Kong are caught in this ‘queer dilemma’ and were willing to consider corporate sponsorship on a case-by-case basis. Yet, efforts to get such sponsorship were often unsuccessful because these Pride events were perceived as too ‘political’, or not sufficiently beneficial for the potential sponsors. Jade explained that Soweto Pride was willing to consider sponsorship if ‘their intentions are right and genuine’, but that corporate sponsors would not be allowed to participate in the Pride march because, as has been discussed, the purpose of the march was political protest and mourning victims of homophobic violence. The year I attended Soweto Pride a local, black owned, estate agent had sponsored a stall at the afterparty. However, wider efforts to obtain sponsorship, even from companies that support Johannesburg Pride, have been unsuccessful. At the request of the organisers of Soweto Pride, I tried to broker sponsorship with a major transnational bank that has sponsored multiple Prides. The bank declined because although they operate in South Africa, they explained that their customers were mostly elite investors and wealthy expatriates, and they do not have the customer base in the country to ‘justify’ sponsoring an event ‘like Soweto Pride’. Wylie Yeo, the organiser of Hong Kong Pride, was keenly aware of the double standards that many local employers had about LGBT advocacy and how their sponsorship was contingent on the Pride not engaging with ‘political’ demands:

Some banks seemed to be very outspoken [in support of LGBT rights], but they never sponsored us. There were ones that seemed to be very supportive of LGBT but were reluctant to say anything about support for legislative change. And that particular bank [a major Hong Kong and London based bank], they haven’t been our sponsors. They’ve chosen to sponsor another event that is non-political³... One of the staff once told me that Hong Kong Pride is ‘too political’ for them to support.

In Hong Kong, the corporations unwilling to openly request legal rights for LGBT communities have also been accused as being willing accomplices in increased broader political repression in the territory (Makortoff, 2023). The difficulties in getting corporate sponsorship for Pride events viewed as ‘too political’, ‘too confrontational’ and/or engaging with communities that are considered as offering a poor return on advertising confirmed the belief by the same Pride organisers that corporations were exploitative and that they did not consider grassroots LGBT communities interests to be important.

Pride organisers can choose to accept corporate sponsorship and then ignore the instructions or wishes of the sponsor. Kates and Belk (2001) argue that this approach to subverting, or repurposing, corporate sponsorship and advertising during Pride was evident in their research on Pride attendees in Toronto. The organisers of Hong Kong Pride explained that in the aftermath of the large-scale ‘Umbrella Movement’ pro-democracy protests in 2014,

One of our sponsors asked us to sign an agreement to be non-political. And we signed it, but we also did our event. And that year...we invited those student leaders [from the Umbrella Movement] to be on our stage. And we discussed how we would answer if they [the sponsors] asked us why we were inviting them and we said we would answer that, in our interpretation, this is not political to invite them, but we would not explain it further. Finally, they didn't ask. So, I think it was just a gesture and they understand that we will do it our way.

As discussed above, Hong Kong Pride has struggled to attract significant and ongoing corporate sponsorship because of the perception it is ‘too political’. This raises questions of whether the short-term tactic of subverting the wishes of sponsors to be ‘non-political’ led to reluctance to support and sponsor in the longer term.

In mainland China, the organisers of Shanghai Pride believed that corporate sponsorship, using corporate spaces to hold events, and using the language of business was the most effective, and indeed the only, way to address the Chinese state and society about LGBT rights. In Shanghai, the organisers of Pride were prevented from holding a march and held multiple events over a two-week period. Shanghai Pride adopted what was described as ‘the soft, not the hard sell’ by Wei, one of the organisers. Wei continued that ‘If we talk about human rights or we talk like the “politicals”, the Chinese people wouldn't care. What they care about is money. So...let's use money to talk’. This embrace of the capitalist ‘business case’ for LGBT protections as good for economic growth and employee productivity reflects broader shifts in ‘global homocapitalism’ (Rao, 2020) where the market is presented as the main driver and solution for LGBT rights progress. Yet, despite this pragmatic and cautious approach, Shanghai Pride was eventually discontinued in 2021 after harassment of the organising committee became too great (Liang, 2023). While corporate support could be achieved and subject to a process of subversion and co-optation, ultimately Pride organisers had limited agency over broader political and economic imperatives, leading to questions about the usefulness and value of the pragmatic positions they had adopted toward corporate involvement in Pride.

Conclusion: Queer activism and the politics of Pride

The Johannesburg People's Pride manifesto quoted at the outset of this article called for a Pride that is a utopic 'microcosm' not a 'mirror' of the racism, classism and sexism of wider South African society. However, as this article has argued, LGBT organising in South Africa, Mumbai, Hong Kong and elsewhere continues to mirror and exacerbate deeper socio-economic and political divisions, yet even within these societies Pride can be organised in inclusive terms and campaign for important grassroots issues. Soweto, Ekurhuleni and Khumbulani Pride serve to highlight ongoing issues of gender-based and homophobic violence; Hong Kong Pride focuses on legal demands for LGBT (and broader political) rights for the local population and anyone can join the march. Holding a march, rather than a parade, with an expressly political purpose was a common theme for queer Pride organisers. This feeds into Shulman's critique that Pride organisers make 'choices' about the nature and purpose of Pride and can make different choices with different political and social effects if they so wish. Rao's caution that these 'choices' are in fact limited and structured by the demands of neoliberal capitalism is also evidenced by the negative consequences, in terms of lack of funding, visibility and personal risk, should Pride organisers step too far from the norms of the market.

This article has explored whether queer activist critiques of Pride in the One-Third World are replicated in the Two-Thirds World and what the purposes and rationale of alternative/rival/queer Prides organised in the Two-Thirds World are.

By analysing detailed ethnographic data and focussing on under-researched contexts, the article challenges taken for granted binaries in existing scholarship on Pride. This scholarship often positions Pride in the Global North/West as sites of progressiveness and/or political contestation, while imagining Pride events in the Global South/East as uncomplicated and void of intercommunity debate or political controversy. The complexity of queer politics around Pride is better understood by focussing on grassroots queer activism and tracing the issues and challenges queer communities face, rather than theorising about Pride using catch-all, abstract or Global North perspectives.

Research on Pride should always be mindful of how Pride and LGBTQ+ activism is framed by and engages with the dynamics of global capitalism. I believe one of the key reasons for sanguine accounts of Pride in the existing academic literature is the failure to engage with the ideological effects of neoliberalism on Pride and LGBT identities. Pride is one of the most visible platforms for 'global homocapitalism' (Rao, 2020) and while the criticism that Pride has become 'capitalism with a pink hue' (Tatchell, 2019), is a charge that is made by queer activists across global contexts, this claim belies the reality that many of the same activists struggle for funds and try to obtain corporate funding, even if to subvert it. Even Pride organisers who are sharply critical of corporate involvement and neoliberalism find themselves attempting to secure corporate funding. The necessity for funds and the precarity of queer activism in the Two-Thirds World is a factor that needs greater acknowledgement and consideration by queer critics in the One-Third World. Receiving such funding, whether from an international NGO, government or corporation can create opportunities, but it can also introduce homonormative pressures to conform and meet the expectations of the funder. The packaging of LGBT rights claims as good

‘business sense’ can, in the short term, serve to raise awareness and open conversations about LGBT communities and protections, as well as provide a space for a Pride event to be held in an otherwise hostile political or legal environment. Yet, as the organisers of Shanghai Pride found to their cost, this strategy was trumped by a broader political crackdown in China and as in Hong Kong, and elsewhere, corporations can demonstrate considerable reluctance to speak out on behalf of LGBT communities in politically tense environments. The dominance of global capitalism defines multiple forms of inequality and marginalisation for activists in the Two-Thirds World.

It is important to continue mapping and analysing the development, manifestation and ideological effects of Pride globally and to trace how LGBTQ+ rights struggles and global homocapitalism intersect. It is equally important to highlight and analyse the complex, intersectional struggles and challenges queer activists engage with across the Two-Thirds World and to be cautious and to question the realities, groups and causes the emerging global elite of ‘career queers’ highlight and consider important. Above all, academic literature on Pride needs to continually engage with the effects of late-capitalism on Pride and make visible they lived realities of queer grassroots struggles.

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Notes

1. While boundaries can be unclear, I define ‘mainstream’ Prides as those with longstanding official support from government and/or private institutions and advertisers. Mainstream Prides will also take place in prominent spaces in urban areas and have significant levels of public and/or media visibility.
2. Simon Nkoli was an openly gay member of the African National Congress and played a leading role in campaigning for LGBT rights in South Africa and co-organised the first Johannesburg Pride in 1990.
3. Pink Dot

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