

The Politics of Radical LGBTQ+ Organisations in the UK: Aspirations, Pluralities, Realities

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Introduction

This project investigates the question of **how social movements** and activist organisations, particularly those formed by queer people, **relate to the systems of power they both seek to survive within and to deconstruct**. Taking the frequently applied social movement theoretical frame of assimilationist and liberatory/ revolutionary movement strategies, which suggest that organisations either aim to create change from within social structures or outside of them, this study investigates the productiveness and accuracy of this lens through interviews with organisers.

Methodology

The project was conducted with a focus on one particular **small-scale LGBTQ+ organisation** that self-identifies as anti-assimilationist and radical. I conducted 2 semi-structured interviews with organisers of this group. Although this small sample size means that the project cannot be used to generalise broadly about LGBTQ+ organisations in the UK, it does offer **a specific and unique insight into the viewpoint of an anti-assimilationist organisation**, and their relationship to specific facets of power. I also conducted an extensive literature review on my themes of study.

Aims

Within this project, I aimed to critically reflect on the ways in which **binary and sometimes restrictive terms are deployed while categorising the nature of social movements**. In doing so, I sought to gain a better understanding of the ways in which social movements and organisations relate to the structures they operate within and against, developing **a more explicit understanding both of the relationships between social movements and complex networks of power**, and of the nature of the networks of power themselves.

Findings

My main finding was that **while the relationships between social movements and systems of power are often described as being clearly divided into either being assimilationist or being liberatory/ revolutionary, this is an over-simplification, as the acts of disrupting systems and surviving within them are in reality deeply entangled**. I divided my findings into 3 main subsections:

- **Aspirations** - The organisation was formed on the basis of permissive anarchist principles that allow anyone to organise an event as long as they can find the support and resources, and opposes homogenising EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) structures. In this way, **the organisation is clearly anti-assimilationist**, suggesting that **systems of power have shifted such that LGBTQ+ organising does not inherently occur outside of the mainstream**.
- **Pluralities** - Within the organisation there exists **a diversity of approaches and aims**. This acceptance of a diversity of approaches also extended to the relationship with other, more mainstream organisations - rather than the dismissive or purely critical attitude towards other groups I had predicted, **the organisation saw different groups as fulfilling different roles, and were not inherently opposed to less radical groups**, viewing them instead as meeting various needs
- **Realities** - The complex and not clearly condemnatory relationship to other, sometimes more mainstream, organisations suggests the nature of the reality the organisation has adapted to contend with. This is a reality in which **they are not prepared to sacrifice the material needs of queer people now in favour of a more pure revolutionary ideology, and in which the needs of queer people as they present now are the central focus of organising**

Significance

These findings suggest that **the binaries typically ascribed to social movements fail to fully encapture the complex and multidimensional relationship to systems of power** that organisers contend with. This suggests a need for social movement theorists to find new lenses and ways of interpreting social movements - Fraser (2020) and her framing of **'transformative' and 'affirmative' strategies** represents one such example, but one of my most significant contributions is the potential utility of **the lens of harm reduction**, a framework originating in abolitionist feminism that suggests that **organisers can, and indeed must, find ways to simultaneously challenge networks of power, while also allowing people to survive within them**.

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