

The Cypriot Affect: The First Pride Parade in Cyprus and the Queering of Cypriot Culture

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abstract

In May 2014 the first ever Gay Pride Parade was held with tremendous success in Cyprus, a society that is still by-and-large very conservative. At the same time, in an adjacent street, the powerhouse that is the Greek Orthodox Church, organised a counter-parade comprising of far-right individuals, nuns and priests which, both in terms of numbers and influence, failed spectacularly. This paradox spurred a wave of analyses and examination of the way in which Cypriot society and culture seem to be changing until today, 7 years later, engaged as it would seem in a queering process, as well as on issues such as gay activism and civil partnership. My article analyses the ways in which the Parade's expressed queer desire and the participants' performativity starting in 2014, gesture towards a significant socio-political change in Cyprus. This analysis is largely based on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desire as a machine that generates reality, as I approach the Parade's "queerness" as an expression of Cypriot society's polyvalent socio-political manifestations which intentionally include the disenfranchised and provide new answers to questions of belonging. It is ultimately argued that, the way in which performative imagination seems to be able to generate reality, gestures towards a better understanding of the weak points of a dominant structure, becoming thus much more influential than the way in which Michel Foucault understands the notion of "power". In other words, that the participants' actions, choices and played-out desires lead to a final, dual performance that is the Parade and the counter-parade on the "stage" that is Cyprus. The Parade's cultural performativity then, can be read as a site of vital performances, a kind of Bakhtinian carnivalesque that can lead to an understanding of a new socio-political identity which entails hope for the future. Thus, the dynamics of non-heteronormative sexual identities in Cyprus and their political potentials are explored vis-à-vis their capacity to interrogate hegemonic discourses, all of which gestures towards the queering of Cypriot culture.

keywords

queer studies, desire, Cyprus, culture, performativity, identity

Beginnings

On May 31, 2014, the first-ever Gay Pride Parade (henceforth "the Pride") was held with tremendous success in the centre of Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, a society that is still by and large very conservative. This inaugural event marked 16 years since homosexuality was finally decriminalised in Greece in 1998, mostly because of extreme political pressure from the European Union during accession negotiations. On the day of the Parade, a colourful wave of around

4000 people turned out to celebrate. Meanwhile, the powerhouse that is the Greek Orthodox Church had organised a counter-demonstration, comprising largely far-right individuals, churchgoers, and priests, and led by Isaias, the Bishop of Tamassos. This counter-demonstration, both in terms of numbers and influence, failed spectacularly compared to the Pride, with the police blocking a small contingent of around 50 counter-protesters, from entering the Pride celebration grounds. This event spurred me to think about the way in which Cypriot society and culture seemed to be changing, engaged as it would seem in a queering process, as well as in issues such as gay activism, adoption by gay couples, and civil partnerships — issues which had hitherto been largely ignored.

The scope of the present article, which is the culmination of the thought process that started with my participation in that first Pride, is to argue that the first Pride Parade and its participants' expressed desires and performativity functioned as a highly visible, socio-politically charged moment of disruption to the established heteronormative framework within which Cypriot society largely functioned. In other words, that first Pride was a manifestation of a Cypriot moment of *affect* of sorts, which, if approached in such a way, can explain why its performative and disruptive force helped lead to social change in the following years, as well as why this moment of affect was a defining moment in the Cypriot collective imaginary, shaping to a large extent its future transformation. The present article adds to a body of scholarship on social movements that circumvent the state and facilitate cultural change, which is approached here as central to social, political, and other institutional struggles and conquests, all the while pointing at performativity's affective potential. The question that is being asked is if, and how, concrete change can emanate from cultural expressions. I believe the answer is affirmative, taking into consideration that we should not view a cultural event which transgresses established norms as a cessation of a process. Nevertheless, such an approach to a cultural event as that which was seen at the first Pride in Cyprus, and its ramifications, need to be considered as fundamental to local socio-political struggles. Within this line of thought, it could be argued, then, that tangible socio-political change can emanate from cultural movements such as Pride Parades, especially in their earliest state, joining as they do other trajectories, such as political pressure and economic interests. In such a way, cultural movements like these form a nexus of enabling agents, all moving towards the same goal — that of change — working as disrupting moments, positively influencing and effectively altering the collective imaginary of a people. Indeed, just six months after the Pride, the Civil Cohabitation Act was passed by the Parliament of Cyprus, allowing gay marriage for the first time, while anti-gay and hate rhetoric were criminalised the following year. What is more, change was evident in the popular attitude and opinion. Surveys following the Pride showed a dramatic increase in the percentage of people supporting

LGBTQI+ rights, reflecting a widespread understanding of the message “LGBTQI+ rights are human rights” painted on a sign carried during the Pride.

What this article will attempt to do is pinpoint the underlying thread between the expressed performances of the Pride and that very concrete social, legal, and political change which came about in Cyprus in the following years. The hypothesis is, then, that when cultural and state politics are approached as inextricably intertwined, a tangible transformation of society and of the Cypriot collective imaginary can be elucidated. Through focusing on the idea that the first Pride in Cyprus constituted an instant of affect and a defining moment of transgression, it can be argued that the people’s attitudes, expressions, desires, and performances in it, along with the exposure and the traction the event had in the public sphere, actually induced change by decisively transforming social opinion and the political environment alike, all the while giving rise to a new social reality, one that was more tolerant and accepting of human rights.

The importance of such cultural events has been underlined by Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag in their 2018 article, “Pride Parades and LGBT Movements”, which argued that the Pride Parades’ protest dynamics function towards a shared manifest expression of the performances of a collective identity pertaining to marginalised sexualities, which in turn leads to the creation of political identities based on sexuality, gender identity, and community (2-3). Katherine McFarland Bruce, discussing the very first Prides in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, describes how they became a site from within which a challenge of the queer stigma started emanating. Following along the lines of these thoughts, I argue that the queering of the Cypriot collective imaginary through the cultural phenomenon that was the 2014 Pride helped society in taking a step towards the “normalisation” of members of the Cypriot queer community and their “standardisation” through protective legislation, joining as it did other forces at work such as political pressure from the European Union, activism from NGOs and other organised groups, and even social media visibility and outspokenness.

Given that the 2014 Pride was the first public, highly visible expression of mass queer activism in Cyprus ever, it can be argued that it brought to the forefront of society a cultural phenomenon pertaining to a new social movement functioning as political activism and as a form of resistance, which consequently pointed at the first signs of a possible change. It is the purpose of this article, then, to describe the Pride’s part in the process of change. The Pride has been organised every year since 2014; one could argue that even its very existence was politically subversive and transgressive, as not only did it function as a site of cultural protest which challenged the stigma of queerness, but it helped society

move towards manifesting these parades as recurrent, culturally visible expressions of the LGBTQI+ community, which has consequently allowed for new politics to enter the social nexus. In helping visibility and in shedding light on the queer experience in Cyprus, the concept of performance is fundamental. Performance as protest has been taken up by Benjamin Shepard (2009: 452-453), who wrote that “social movements are essentially constructions of countless performances,” focusing on how the actions of participants influence social opinion and how protests such as Pride parades break “through barriers to change public opinion and create change.” Thus, performativity can be approached here, following Judith Butler (1993: 241), as a “turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation [... which can forge] a future from resources inevitably impure.” (1993: 241). The theatricality of the performances itself, as it will be elaborated further on, allowed for the participants to dictate their own terms of belonging, taking back the power of self-determination, which hitherto had been the prerogative of dominant structures which had labelled them as deviant, predatory, and unworthy of any spotlight. In so doing, it was possible to subvert traditional and backward attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities, when faced with queer expressiveness and visibility.

For the purposes of this article, the notion of affect is taken to mean a politically charged concept of power, in line with the definition put forward by Brian Massumi in “The Autonomy of Affect” (1995) and *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). Affect is approached here as a political and power concept, a suspension of action–reaction circuits and linear temporality in synch with what might be called passion and a non-conscious experience of intensity, a moment of unformed and unstructured potential which cannot be fully realised in language, it being anarchic and therefore not limited (Massumi, 2002: 29-30). This article thus offers one explanation (of many possible ones) of the undertones of that first Pride in Cyprus in 2014, approaching it by trying to tap into affect’s most striking topographies, namely its embodied existence and performative drives. It is argued that these characteristics, very much present in the Pride, culminated in a performative queer show of force, thus inextricably intertwining that exact moment in time to Cypriots’ socio-political lives by altering the collective imaginary of society as a whole, through approaching it as not an agent of change on its own, but rather, as a symptom of the beginning of a process of change which had been brewing for some time. In other words, the Pride did not change society, but it nudged it to move forward, as will be explained below. To help make this approach clearer, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ideas on queer performativity will also be used, as I approach the Parade’s “queerness” as an expression of Cypriot society’s polyvalent socio-political manifestations which intentionally include the disenfranchised, all the while providing new answers to questions of belonging

for marginalised groups. In other words, what is argued is that the Parade can be read as a powerful, articulatory exhibition of a collective desire for a positive change pertaining to the status of LGBTQI+ rights.

In trying to bring together the concepts of affect and performativity, it is important to note that they do not necessarily always work together or contradict each other. In fact, I approach these guiding concepts as exactly that: guides to explain different bits and pieces of the expressed desires of the Pride and its aftermath. In any case, such complex concepts cannot be approached monolithically or superficially, as one runs the danger of not really understanding their true potential to explain, fundamentally, how their complexity can be applied to the argument that culture can alter reality for this specific moment in Cypriot queer history. It is true that these two concepts seem to be functioning on diverse theoretical models; however, one could also argue that they come together in that they both reject dualistic binaries, opting instead for a celebration of performativity as diversity and fluidity, stemming from premises such as queerness, which then overflow in society and politics. Such an approach, which also allows us to explore a larger breadth of these concepts' true potential, can lead us to a more nuanced application, one that exceeds limitations imposed by heteronormativity in this case. This, in turn, opens up an anarchic space of possibilities, which can now include the socio-politically marginalised who were excluded by intransigent notions of what *being* actually means, leading to new ways of imagining subjectivities.



The police stopped sporadic bouts of violence from the anti-demonstration.

Photo Credit: Costa Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI.Cyprus.

that first Pride, present challenges to the dominant narratives prevalent at the time in Cypriot society vis-à-vis issues such as sexuality, human rights, visibility, and the expression of marginalised groups, through such characteristics as spectatorship, self-expression, and determination as well as affective potential. Such challenges are approached, consequently, as possibilities for extending the space available to culture to change people's lives. Queer theory is the realm within which affect and performativity, as approached above, can be put to work. Judith Butler's work on the performative character of sexuality allowed us for the first time to approach sexuality not merely as something that pertains and is limited to biology, but as something that goes beyond the pathological

aspect of it. In Cyprus, homosexuality has been treated as a disease, both by the Church and the State, and with so-called “conversion therapies” being offered until quite recently. The participants in the anti-demonstration, from the far-right political party ELAM to the Church and other ultra-conservative orthodox organisations such as PAXOK (Pancyprian Orthodox Christian Movement), tried to attack participants in the Pride but were easily stopped by the police, due to their small numbers.



Photo Credit: Costa
Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI
Cyprus.

determinism, in trying to understand society and our place within it, all the while celebrating the possibility of freedom that such an approach of affect can bring about.

Such a perspective has another advantage, as it allows us to move beyond the limits of approaching the Pride as inherently sexual; this would be too limiting to its true potential as a counter-hegemonic apparatus to restrictive dualisms. In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993: 8) has argued that one of the things “queer” can refer to is the open web of possibilities, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when “the constituent elements of anyone’s

The present article’s approach to affect and performativity can help move the discussion away from physically dangerous manifestations of trying to “explain” the presence of members of the queer community — which in turn can lead to ways to “cure” them and, of course, violence — and instead towards an understanding of the full potentials of the existence of queer culture within all of us. As a participant’s T-shirt read: “Some people are gay. Get over it!”

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work allows us to study affect in its full variety and complexity, rather than treating non-heteronormativity as an abnormality. Further still, Brian Massumi seeks to explain the political scope of affect, which is approached here as a drive, or a perspective, which allows us to escape limiting, Manichean binaries and avoid the trap of social

gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." She has associated performativity with queer and, given that queer is a politically charged term, it is a "near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy [...] experimental, creative, performative force" (2003: 2). Indeed, most of the participants of the Pride were not members of the LGBTQI+ community, nor was the event inherently sexual, despite some obvious sexual overtones. If one approaches "queer" in such a way, one misses the complexity of what the term entails. It is my contention that the expressed desires and performativity of the Pride indicated a move beyond a mere reading of "queer" in sexual terms, instead functioning as a reality-generating social machine, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term. Thus, one should not approach the concept of queer expression as necessarily or intrinsically sexual; rather, it can be approached as multifaceted and ahistorical, with transcultural and transindividual aspirations, as otherwise, we run the risk of limiting the Pride's true potential. What I am gesturing towards here is a transcendent visage of the Pride's expressed performative desires, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas towards a sexual liberalism which allows the individual subject to escape the ideological limits of hegemonic insights and contravene a limiting political perspective, looking instead at the affective as formative of the subject: it is only then that we can really understand the true importance of that first Pride Parade.

From my personal experience of participating in the Pride, instead of approaching the parade as inherently sexual, I propose that a sense of togetherness, of coming



together via the forging of a homosocial – rather than purely sexual – bond stemming from the people's expressed desires, was evident in the coalescing of all these people: strangers embraced each other, walked, sang, and danced together, just like old friends. Those hitherto associated with marginalised lifestyles and the people or groups that support them marched united, resisting at-

Coming together. Photo Credit:
Costa Gavrielides, Accept
LGBTI Cyprus

tempts of suppression by so-called "traditional" values, and forging homosocial bonds in the process that transcended limiting markers such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. This bond was further strengthened by the shared performative actions of the participants: "In its deconstructive sense performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the

performative is the theatrical" (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003: 2, emphasis added). In the Pride, there was a multitude of theatrical, performative expressions of desire that were not necessarily sexual or, indeed, limited to queer ones. There were people from the entire LGBTIQ+ spectrum as well as cisgendered people, families, and hetero- and non-heteronormative performances. Some people were extravagantly dressed, many were dancing, singing, playing games, all coming together in a huge party at the end, everyone marching together for a common cause. What united them was not a sexually charged drive, but the desire to see a social and political change, the desire to improve society, the desire for freedom of expression, freedom of being, freedom from social norms through the unstructured expression of desires and emotions. All of these people came together in a colourful wave of performative power, a circus of misfits and their supporters on the stage that was Cyprus' streets, with a tongue-in-cheek mentality, pointing towards a brighter, more inclusive future and a newly-formed sense of culture, one that is more tolerant, progressive, and challenging towards dominant structures. Indeed, "no true self exists prior to its immersion in culture; the self is constructed in and through its relations with others and with systems of power" (Weeks, 1985: 187) — this holds true for us all.

In that, the Pride's expressed desires and "eccentric" performances were the core of its positive productive force. Rejecting repression, disavowal, and prohibition, the performative act and, hence, unassimilable power stemming from its fluidity and connectivity, enables participants to move beyond restrictive, socially constructed structures by transforming as well as exceeding them. Arguably, the gamut of the participants' presence and performance and the inability to define them through a causal linearity, a social logic based on ill-defined heteronormative markers, point to the Pride's unformed, unstructured, and unassimilable potential which has the power to move subjectivity beyond social, political, and personal exigencies. The collective, performative actions of the participants in the Parade can gesture towards a better understanding of the weak points of a dominant structure, thus becoming politically and socially charged with a power that can challenge said structures which have been (and still are) deeply embedded in the Cypriot collective imaginary.



The Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus participated in the anti-demonstration.

Photo Credit: Costa Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI Cyprus.

enced widespread discrimination and marginalisation (OHCHR, 2009). Stavros Karayanni and Nikos Trimikliniotis (2008: 6) underline that the Greek Cypriot community is a conservative society “unwilling to abandon traditional beliefs about social and sexual norms, and gender roles.” This collective attitude has been ratified by European and national surveys that:

[...] consistently highlight deeply entrenched homophobia and intolerance for other sexual identities. Marriage, children, a good name in society, and attachment to orthodox values define the expectations of the large majority of the population. LGBT people are seen as posing a challenge to these expectations. Therefore, they are relegated to taboo and receive mostly hostile treatment in public discourse. (Karayanni and Trimikliniotis, 2008: 6)

It is argued then, that in such a predominantly homophobic collective imaginary, the participants’ actions, choices, performances, and played-out desires at the Pride temporarily transformed the performative space of Nicosia into a collectively liminal one, holding a mirror up to the face of society where, not despite but because of its anarchic state, the ongoing dialectical process between the marginal and the dominant structures became clearly visible.

Disruptions

The days prior to that first Pride Parade in Cyprus in May 2014 were not like any others. There was a general euphoria, expressed through publications in progressive newspapers, social media, and TV channels, which was somewhat strange, given the practical invisibility of the queer community in mainstream culture at the time. On the other hand, the Church of Cyprus condemned the Parade

As mentioned, above the Greek Orthodox Church wields tremendous power in shaping an already largely conservative society. There is no actual separation of Church and State as, for example, religious indoctrination is still taught at schools in all grades. The majority of Cypriots are highly religious and, consequently, homophobic.

What is more, LGBTQI+ people in Cyprus have long experi-

through remarks made by the archbishop as well as other bishops, about homosexuality as human beings' "fall from grace," an "illness," and not a natural way of life or choice (Psillides, 2014).



Such an approach came into stark contrast with the parade's motto of "Same Love – Equal Rights," with the march being but the climax of two weeks of events that included film screenings, theatre performances, dance events, and academic workshops.

It is true that even though the organisers expected the Pride to be a success, they did not foresee its magnitude, according to Costa Gavrielides, then president of ACCEPT-LGBTI Cyprus, the organisation responsible for the Parade. There were rumours of thousands of people turning up to cause trouble and incite violence, but the reality could not have been further from the projections. But why? What

Orthodox participants in the anti-demonstration.

Photo Credit: Costa Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI Cyprus.

was the deeper function of the Pride? A possible answer to that question lies in understanding how affect carries social and political power. It was through the body and its performances witnessed at the Pride that a moment of intensity came to exist outside of language. The Pride was much more than just a street party; rather, it was an intense moment in history which showcased the way forward, towards a more tolerant society and more rights for marginalised groups. To get to that conclusion, one needs to analyse the concept of affect in relation to the body as carrying such force, approaching it through its performative power. Massumi (2002: ix) writes that affect is always present in important events; it opens the world, and is at the cutting edge of change. By approaching affect as a non-verbal yet highly disruptive element of desire and a non-conscious state of being which can alter collective imaginaries, it can be argued

that what the Cypriot society experienced when watching the Pride was something much more important than the sum of its parts. The collective performance surpassed any individual consciousnesses, overflowing into society itself, as Massumi explains:

A power to affect and be affected is a potential to move, act, perceive, and think — in a word, powers of existence. The “to be affected” part of the definition says that a body’s powers of existence are irreducibly relational. They can only be expressed in dynamic relation with other bodies and elements of the environment. The power to affect and the power to be affected are inseparable; they are two sides of the same coin. They are reciprocals, growing and shrinking as a function of each other. So, from the start, affect overflows the individual, tying its capacities to its relational entanglement with others and the outside. *Affect is fundamentally trans-individual.* (Massumi qtd. in Evans, 2017, emphasis added)



Photo Credit: Art-Official
Intelligence.

fied a visceral and paradoxical expression of individuality, which simultaneously underlined the importance of the individual while transgressing it for the greater good, in affecting, collectively, an understanding of who those people were. One of the signs held by a participant, a transgender woman, read: “I was born twice. The second time, for myself.”

This expression of rebirth speaks to how this moment of affect was explained to the viewers, what this kind of statement actually meant, first for the person carrying the sign and, through the power of the image, how this disruptive moment had the power to spill over into society, transgressing the boundaries of the sign, of the Parade, and of the individual, ultimately reaching everyone through the exposure of the event, and becoming, as such, a non-verbal moment of intense change.

Judith Butler (1997: 20) writes: "No act of speech can fully control or determine the rhetorical effects of the body which speaks." In the Parade, the bodies spoke, and they spoke very loudly. The power of the performative bodies we saw in the Parade and its consequent political connotations, lies exactly in their expressive state rather than in linguistic edifices such as the ones issued by the Archdiocese of Cyprus against the Parade. This has a deeper meaning, as Christopher Nealon (2011: 270) says, namely that the change of dominant structures is possible, as opposed to a mere response to them. If the Prides' affective, performative connotations are examined through such a lens then, it can be argued that they have true, political meaning, and that such a reading of affect as a carrier of such power, as Massumi furthermore argues, "expands the realm of the political beyond its usual connotation of formations of domination, containment by institutions, and



Photo Credit: European Parliament, Sarah Malian.

channelling by norms" (Evans, 2017). The importance of that first Pride then, read through the lens of affect, is extended to a state where existential powers are trying to express themselves, "laying claim to an autonomy of becoming" (Evans, 2017). The close connection seen here between affect and the body, as well as the performance of the expressed embodied experiences at the Parade, constituted such an example of a positive power of being, of existing and expressing through performing. Simon O'Sullivan (2001: 126) has worded it as such: "You cannot read affects, you can only experience them." Through that performative experience of the Pride's participants, an autonomy of becoming and a new way of self-definition started to present itself as a choice, one that was indeed not bound by age-old, so-called "traditional" and most definitely oppressive, heteronormative dominant notions, and one that challenged exclusive hegemonic narratives of social politics in the process, especially since that 2014 Pride, being the first ever organised mass queer activity which was also heavily marketed, and a highly successful cultural and social event at the same time.

It was Deleuze who proposed affect as having a "bodily meaning that pierces social interpretation, confounding its logic, and scrambling its expectations [...] the critical focus is on bodily displacement" (Hemmings, 2005: 181). In other words, the body does and the mind follows (Deleuze, 1997: 124). When affect is read as a nonconscious intensity that can stimulate bodies into performing,

paired with a stress on its political importance, it makes it possible for the Parade to be approached as an important moment in time, a distinct milestone of an ongoing process on the way to a more accepting society, while at the same time helping us to avoid thinking about the body in an essentialist way. The Pride's participating bodies' existential intensity functioned as an enabling agent towards allowing them to enact themselves in their own way, under any circumstances, and in every situation. This unashamed, polyvocal, and multi-faceted aestheticism in the Pride which was expressed for the first time on such a grand scale, allowed them, in turn, to break from past limiting and oppressive narratives, given the legislative change concerning LGBTQI+ rights that came about immediately after it, as discussed below. What was clearly underlined was the enabling functioning of the Pride, which allowed participants to resist a backward-looking glance based on "tradition" and religion, and a sense of an imaginary, "pure" homeland, frozen in time in an "idyllic moment outside history [...]" (which) lies in the heart of dominant nationalist [...] ideologies" (Gopinath 2005: 4) and demand equal rights. And it is argued that it was through the queering effect of the Parade that these "legacies (were) imaginatively contested and transformed" (Gopinath, 2005: 4) and that heteronormative and patriarchal structures were contested, subverted, and challenged.

Butler (1993: 226) has argued that queer "emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity." In her speech "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" (2011), she takes this argument further by focusing on public assemblies, expanding the scope of performativity beyond speech to include the corporeal actions of bodies. She emphasises how embodied assemblies, just like a Pride, I may add, can lead to a new, highly politicised way of understanding the states of the individual. The Pride and its success brought to the forefront the experience of queer bodies performing, exposing themselves, becoming interconnected as many and as one, all asking, not in words per se, but in movement and through images, to be recognised as equally worthy of all rights afforded to others by society; in effect, to be understood that queer lives matter. Butler (2011) says it clearly: "For politics to take place, the body must appear [...] I must appear to others in ways for which I cannot give an account, and in this way my body establishes a perspective that I cannot inhabit." And these bodies did appear in that first Pride, in all their unassimilable glory. Other theorists have also talked about the power of the body, especially in events such as the Pride, including Wahlström and Wennerhag (2018: 6), who view the performative power of Prides as "acts of self-affirmation in which Pride participants declare their presence openly and without apology to claim their rights of citizenship." Indeed, the Pride's positive, productive force emanated through the expressive states of the

bodies participating in it, and their consequent variability in the form of performative fluidity, challenging in the process the Manichean pseudo-dilemmas embedded in social determinism. It was difficult to categorise the body in the Pride based on what people were familiar with, such as assigned gender roles for instance. It was through the body's uncategorisable state of subjectivity and the blurring of boundaries that the phenomenological stability that stems from nothing else other than a fear of the unknown was challenged, and new ways of being could emerge.

What is more, the expressed bodily aestheticism and performativity evident in the Pride was unashamedly fun, as bodies acting out free from social constraints often tend to be. In discussing Bruce's argument that the element of fun can instigate social change, Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag (2018: 5) add that Prides have proven to be the ideal vehicles for mobilising the LGBTQI+ community to "culturally challenge the hetero-normative norms that pervade societies, to make demands for citizen rights and for building collective identity [...] another world really is possible." Indeed, as Bruce (2016: 21) argues, having fun at Prides and acting out desires is a tactic "that urges societies to change." And there was a lot of fun at that first Pride. Emotions ran high with its party-like attitude, DJs, colourful fashions, signs, music, food, and dancing in the streets. Discussions, book readings, theatrical plays, art events, and film festivals were planned, including an event that I organised at the University of Nicosia. People dressing (or undressing) the way they felt like, signs that said, "Fuck Normal",

famous singers, pioneers of the queer movement, activists, politicians, people from different backgrounds, all acting the way each one of them felt like, but at the same time in a way that, collectively, spoke to the same goal, that of the hope for change.

No one is arguing that the Pride was, in and of itself, the sole catalyst that brought about change, nor do I buy into idealised mo-

ments. Yet, as Judith Butler (2011) warns us, we should be aware of any analysis fully against idealisation. Indeed, the transformations that occurred in the period following this social and political mobilisation, do warrant a certain aspect of idealisation. The 2014 Pride came at the right moment and in the right place, like the last missing piece of a puzzle, creating such favourable conditions that allowed for change to become visible for the first time; a type of change



Participants in the Pride:
uncategorisable.

Photo Credit: Costa
Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI
Cyprus.

that manifested in influencing society and creating new subjectivities and understandings of what it really meant to be a citizen of Cyprus. This process of change is still ongoing: in the latest Pride, organised in September 2022 in Cyprus, the slogan was “Marriage for all,” as the next goal is, according to Accept LGBTI Cyprus, to raise awareness, urging the Government to introduce “legislation that will safeguard equal rights for all citizens with regard to the right to marriage and all rights and responsibilities deriving from it, as it is the case in 31 other countries around the world” (Philippou, 2022), something which would probably have taken a much longer time to achieve, had it not been for that first Pride. In that sense, an “idealisation” of the Pride as being the perfect event, in the perfect place, at the perfect time, can be justified by the wave of changes that followed it. Again though, Pride parades are not an end in themselves, nor do they constitute a complete, comprehensive strategy of change. But that first Pride was an important milestone, a sign on the road to change, clearly pointing towards an affective alliance of different parts of the social nexus, all working in unison towards a common goal.

Almost all political parties (AKEL, DISY, DIKO, Greens, EDEK) participated in the Pride, apart from the far-right, racist ELAM which was a part of the counter-demonstration, along with the Church. Embassies (Sweden, USA, Denmark among others), NGOs such as the Turkish Cypriot LGBTQI+ association KUIR Cyprus, the European Commission and the European Parliament, celebrities such as the famous singer Anna Vissi, and LGBTQI+ pioneer activist Alecos Modinos, founder of the Cypriot Homosexual Liberation Movement¹ were also present in the Pride, which was organised under the auspices of Nicosia mayor, Constantinos Yiorkadjis.

What was evident during the Pride was a general sense of refusal of individuals and communities alike to be defined against universal claims of white, heterosexual, androcentric categorisations, such as the ones passed down by the Greek Orthodox Church as well as the educational and social system in general in Cyprus, which has informed the Cypriot collective imaginary to a large extent. The recognition of the power of expressed desires in the Pride is what allowed for a disavowal of the binarisms that limit subjectivity. The national stereotype of the queer subject as a burden to society, which the Pride’s performative prowess challenged through its portrayal of participants in non-heteronormative attires and behaviours, was exposed for what it was and had always been: structurally and inherently ambivalent, which is one of the most powerful and significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power.



Alecos Modinos, the LGBT pioneer activist (right) with the former President of Cyprus George Vassileiou (left).

Photo Credit: Costa Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI Cyprus.

The Pride, through its comical parodying of established norms, stripped the national imaginary of its supposed dominance over the marginalised subject, as the latter became an uncategorisable and unknowable and, therefore, “dangerous” entity. How can one categorise a person who does not want to be associated with any “familiar” set of behavioural codes and refuses to perform socially assigned genders according to stereotypes in place? How can one categorise a transgender woman with a beard? One cannot and one should not try to in the first place. The bodies on the performative stage of the Pride were wonderfully expressive of a diverse array of individual and collective desires alike. Their very existence — the fact that they were paraded before a highly religious and conservative society — helped to deconstruct “safe” and “stable” categories deeply embedded in racism, gendered discrimination, and a “don’t ask, don’t tell” unwritten rule. Butler (2011) again has talked about how bodies become modalities of power, writing that they are a political statement when defying social constraints: “Political claims are made by bodies as they appear and act, as they refuse and as they persist under conditions in which that fact alone is taken to be an act of delegitimation of the state.” Arguing for the close interaction between such disruptive power of desire and the social sphere, Deleuze and Guattari (1972: 175–176) point out that the desiring production is “situated at the limits of social production; the decoded flows, at the limits of the codes and the territorialities” and, as such, the flow of desire can greatly affect the social realm. Such an idea was also picked up by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 397) who underlined this revolutionary potential. They argue that the political, seen through the lens of desire, is nothing if not “concrete production (and) human collectivity in action,” and that “we are masters of the world because our desire and labor regenerate it continuously.” What mobilises desire is not an endless attempt to substitute loss but the energies that flow in and out of the multiple connections that are always invested in the social and the political, and which defy categorisation, evident in the inability of society to classify (and consequently understand) the participants based on clear-cut, limiting, white, androcentric, social and gender binary categories of “belonging” such as man/ woman, masculine/feminine, which is exactly what we saw in the performance of the

Pride. Such a mobilisation of desire entails a sense of belonging that pertains to an essential transgression of limits and boundaries that enables an escape from dominant ideas of subjectivity such as history and hierarchical order, while this approach, I argue, can also be crucial to an understanding of Cypriot cultural, historical, and political trajectories in the last eight years.

Changes

The Pride, in and of itself, in both form and function, succeeded in bringing together people regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or political affiliation; in forging homosocial bonds for people from around the world, and from embassies to politicians. The Pride went so far as to reach across the divide between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, and in so doing, constituted a powerful, affective force. The Turkish-Cypriot LGBTQI+ association KUIR Cyprus (Queer Cyprus) not only participated in the event but was instrumental in its organisation. Since 1974, when Turkey invaded Cyprus and began illegally occupying 37% of its territory, the interactions between the two communities have been almost non-existent, at least until 2004, when the cease-fire line opened up and people were able to cross to the other side for the first time. But even then, the majority of the Greek-Cypriot population does not have relations with Turkish-Cypriots. In this way, the Pride brought together Accept LGBTI Cyprus and Queer Cyprus across the divide, as they worked together in organising the event, moving beyond and above obstacles such as different religions, languages, political viewpoints, ethnicities, and so on, in a concrete example of the bond the Pride helped create among the people of Cyprus.

But did its importance start and finish within the confines of its actual duration? In other words, what of the aftermath? It is my contention that the Pride began to dismantle the rigid constraints of queer reality, already so entwined within society yet unbeknownst to most of us, gesturing towards the recognition of the fluid state of just existing. That process, through its clash with what is labelled as “traditional,” and through the spaces created from that clash, actually opened up new spaces for belonging or for, simply, being. These new spaces could then purposefully include what was hitherto excluded, without absorbing unique characteristics or subsuming identities into a societal nexus that has no room for what is different. In resisting a forceful transformation based on how society expects them to be and look like, all the players in the performative scene of the Pride became actors on a social stage that oscillated between assumed selves, while performing various roles in the process. The Pride was a “prevailing elucidation of queer desire” which initiated a long overdue queering of Cypriot culture, and which “reorient(ed) the traditionally backward-looking glance” of

society (Gopinath, 2005: 3). Such performative actions adhere both to a multiplicity of selves as well as to a sense of malleability pertaining to a variety of social milieus, in which the participants could act out whichever part they desire, as opposed to playing a specific role which is expected of them. It is exactly this chaotic, artistic, uncategorisable performativity which can function as the agent enabling the participants to escape the unbearable burden of being defined by others. Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 2) writes that “queer desires, bodies, and subjectivities (have) become dense sites of meaning in the production and reproduction of notions of ‘culture,’ ‘tradition’ and communal belonging [...] and they also signal the conflation of ‘perverse’ sexualities [...] within a nationalist imaginary.” We fear what we cannot understand and classify, and that fear more often than not leads to violence. But it is through clashes, through a seemingly uncategorisable chaos and anarchy that possibilities can arise and socio-political change can have space to evolve.

A performative act, once expressed, does not belong to the actors themselves, but exceeds and moves beyond them: it becomes uncontrollably radical, decentred, and void of any limitations, eventually becoming larger than life itself. In other words, the point of the expressed performances in the Pride was less in what people put into it and more what people got out of it. Once expressed, the performances were released and became internalised by the Cypriot collective imaginary, first of the participants and the spectators, and then, through them, to the entire Cypriot society, challenging what it really means to be different from the norm, what it really means to be able to express yourself freely. This was one of the defining moments, in my view, when one could actually see how cultural expression can bring about actual change. In this way, the Parade’s cultural expressions, the dancing, the singing, the dressing up, the masquerading, and so on, can be read as a site of vital, vibrant, and (for some) disturbing performance, in the sense that it subverted the assumptions of the dominant style and atmosphere through humour, masquerades, and chaos, and that led to an understanding of a possible emergence of a new state of being, which entails hope for the future. Thus, the undercurrents of affect and of non-heteronormative performative identities and their political relevance are explored vis-à-vis their capacity to interrogate hegemonic discourses, given that the Pride’s nature of affect became entangled with societal norms. In turn, this worked towards illustrating the political nature of performance through a live interaction between performers and audiences, functioning at the same time as a performative moment of disruption and intensity and as a moment surpassing limits and barriers, pointing towards an adequately expressed collective approach to LGBTIQ+ rights, and signifying the queering of Cypriot culture in the process.

Such brazen, unapologetic expressions of disruption of heteronormative norms as those in the Pride can account for the interpretation of the affective forces at play within an expression of aesthetics as passion and, as such, as a suspension of normality and reason. One could argue here that the Pride functioned



Brazen: Queering of the
Cypriot collective imaginary.
Photo Credit: Costa
Gavrielides, Accept LGBTI
Cyprus.

as “a hole in time [...] filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance” (Massumi, 1995: 86). It is exactly through such a suspension of time, of the norm, of space, through a disruption of preset rules and limits, that a new space can be created so that something different can emerge. The argument here is that the first Pride functioned as such a temporal point in time, what with the participants’ jokingly delightful

attitude towards heteronormativity through the release of performative energy, through the unashamed, public exposure of oppressed and hitherto marginalised people and attitudes, which were brought to the surface so forcefully for the first time in the form of images, videos, dances, signs, music, and so on, being paraded on national news for days. This process exploded within society in an unheard-of way, revealing the gaps in what was a seemingly stable collective imaginary, which could then be filled with a new understanding of being, narrated and dictated by the oppressed. In other words, the Pride showcased the possibility of a new experience in the making. It offered a new outlook on the relationships between past and present, individual and collective, within the political sphere. Such a new political outlook stemming from movements such as the Pride can be seen as a collective break from oppressive forces inherited from the past, pointing towards a new way into the future. It is the political which breaks through the personal, which becomes trans-individual, which helps in “liberating self-affirming powers of primary resistance that co-occur with identity but do not belong to it, that are not contained in it but pass through and around it, that open instead onto the outside, onto new affective vistas of collective becoming” (Evans, 2017).

That first Pride Parade in Cyprus was many things. It was a queer Pride. It was a performative Pride. It was a social Pride. It was a sexual Pride. It was a non-sexual Pride. It was a violent Pride. Above all, it was a political Pride. A mere six months later, on November 25, 2015, the Cyprus Parliament passed the Civil Cohabitation Act with almost all the rights of marriage (N. 184(I)/2015), with the memory of the Pride still pulsing through the speeches of almost all the political

parties' representatives during the vote. Two months later, the first Civil Cohabitation was registered by two women on January 29, 2016. The first public ceremony was held a few months later on March 4, 2016 by two men in Nicosia and received extensive coverage from the press.



Gay couple holds first public wedding in Cyprus (Fanos Eleftheriades (left) and Marios Frixou (right)).

Photo Credit: AP Photo, Petros Karatzias.

Some 110 couples have registered their unions in the country so far. The bill that criminalises hate speech and actions was amended in 2015 to include discrimination based on sexuality and anti-gay rhetoric (N. 87(I) / 2015). In a seven-year span, more steps have been taken towards complete equal rights than in the 54 years since the independence of Cyprus in 1960. But more importantly, it is apparent to anyone living on the island that people have started to change. An increasing number of people more readily and frequently report hate crimes against members of the queer community (we have seen a steep rise and conviction of perpetrators since 2014), and more people check themselves prior to inadvertently offending others, trying to be more tolerant, open-minded, and respectful. Society has really become a better place in this regard, which is evident in every aspect of life. To quantify that, in 2006, 75% of Cypriots disapproved of homosexuality, and many believed it could be "cured" (Politis, 2006). A 2006 European Union survey showed that only 14% of Cypriots supported same-sex marriage, with only 10% in favour of adoption (Angus Reid Global Monitor, Polls & Research). However, the situation has seen a rapid development, as a 2014 survey showed a jump of 40% in approval rates, with 53.3% of Cypriot citizens supporting civil unions (Cyprus Mail). Of course, much more needs to be done. The next milestone is the legalisation of adoption by same-sex couples and a completely new approach to sex education in schools.

The Pride was successful in helping raise the levels of tolerance toward community members, leading to the establishment of anti-discrimination laws and the recognition of same-sex relationships, such as registered partnerships. If we are to approach cultural events such as Pride Parades as substantially interfering in the social debate, we can delineate that any changes emanating from them can change both the individual and the world around them, by becoming versatile and organic political tools in the fight for equality. Furthermore, approached

through the lens of affect, the Pride allows us to imagine a new society in a productive, novel way; in this sense, the participants “imagined” a new, inclusive, society, expressing it via their intensive, performative actions. The very first Pride can therefore be seen as a moment where a shared, collective mentality, one that favoured LGBTQI+ rights, began taking a concrete form, through its unapologetic and brazen visibility, thus becoming an instrument that surfaced the beginning of the articulation for political change. This visibility and consequent exposure in mainstream media of the performances in the first Pride in Cyprus helped in affording it the role of a political, affective force of change to be reckoned with, bringing the experience of a hitherto marginalised community (in this case, the LGBTQI+ community), and society’s support of it, at the forefront of society. It was made abundantly clear that the time has come for the people of Cyprus to see the complexity of their sense of belonging, to change their collective imagination into something much more tolerant, and to open it up to include the marginalised. In so doing, the Pride held a mirror up to the face of society. Even more people participated in the subsequent Pride Parades, but none would ever be like the first one, which, above all, drew a recognisable portrait of a (more) modern and tolerable Cypriot society, providing a glimpse into a truly inclusive future, parading it through the streets of Cyprus that day, boldly, unapologetically, and in front of all the institutions, religious, political and social, which were still adhering to what is, essentially, regretted histories of the past translated into the present.

This crystallisation of Prides as a standard cultural form of expression allowed marginalised group members to address the negation, and challenge their cultural inequality and diminishment of their culture politics repeatedly. Since 2014, seven more Pride Parades have followed, thus becoming a staple in Cypriot society and an integral part of our lives, transforming cultures built upon an ill-informed sense of superiority. Since 2014, the Pride Parades in Cyprus have become sites of resistance against cultural, heterosexual norms, working towards both legal and cultural equality. Having said that, the Pride is a performance and, as such, it is not and can never be an end in and of itself in terms of change.

It is, nevertheless, a highly visible manifestation of queer movements and politics and a clear sign of changing times. That first Pride functioned as just one of an array of tools used for social change in LGBTQI+ rights, albeit the most visible one, and as a way to bring that specific fight into the limelight.

It should not be argued that the Pride, as a single event, changed everything, but one cannot simply dismiss it as a frivolous “gay” happening, void of any political underpinnings, because it undeniably helped the struggle for a more aesthetic approach to politics. I therefore argue that the usefulness of the theory of affect lies in its ability to open up a space of unknowability, indeterminacy, and, consequently, of possibilities, which allows us to introduce emotion and desire within the processes of constructing subjects and subjectivities. Indeed, in this case, affect is “synonymous with hope” (Massumi, 2002: 3). This is what that first Pride did for Cyprus, especially in its functioning outside of the limits of sexuality alone, or at least with its understanding of expressed non-heteronormativity as



Hope.

Photo Credit: Author.

inherently including culturally inscribed values and meanings; and it can therefore be argued that the Pride can be approached as a transcendent act that adheres to a multiplicity of codes, sexual, political, and social alike. Such approaches to the socio-political power of expressed desires and performativity can thus be considered as identities and social modes of belonging that can help individuals understand how the world around

them changes. We are on our way to achieving that and much more. And when we take that next step, we will be once again reminded of that first Pride Parade back in 2014, which shed light on the long, difficult road towards a more hopeful and inclusive future for all.

notes

- 1 Alecos Modinos won a case against Cyprus in the European Court in 1993 based on Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights against Section 171 of the Criminal Code of Cyprus which criminalised homosexuality (1993: *Modinos vs Cyprus*) and helped pave the way to the decriminalisation of homosexuality 5 years later.

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