

This summer I happened to have the opportunity to attend the Pride parade in London. I lasted about five hours until I had to leave the parade quite exhausted and with an unpleasant feeling of numbness. By that time not all the floats and groups had made their way through, but I'd had enough. It wasn't the standing or the duration of the whole parade that made me drop the sails, but the rather clear feeling of attending a marketing event rather than a political demonstration. After hours of standing at the edge of a never-ending crowd of credit card providers, airlines, banks, cosmetics manufacturers, clothing brands, management consultancies, software and hardware producers, shopping platforms and various other consumer providers in rainbow garb, two things became very clear to me. First of all, I seem to belong to a very attractive target group whose sympathy or wallets appear to be quite desirable. And secondly, most marketing departments nowadays seem to understand that a company can enhance their image by participating in Pride events in a rather cost-benefit-efficient way in order to give themselves a modern, tolerant and future-oriented coat of paint. Both are highly problematic, but unfortunately not easily wiped away with simple criticism of capitalism. On the contrary, perhaps the LGBTQIA+ struggle for rights has manoeuvred itself into a rather hopeless situation. But what happened?

Criticism of the increasing commercialisation of Pride events is not new. For many years there has been fierce controversy within the scene about this, and in many larger European cities, alternative Pride demonstrations have been established. Their desire is to bring political content onto the streets that is more oriented toward the demands of the beginnings of the movement which began after the Stonewall Riots 50 years ago. One year after the uprisings on Christopher Street, in 1970, the first Pride marches took place. The beginnings of the demonstrations were clearly marked at that time by more resistance against social orders and norms. It was the anger of a long-suppressed minority that broke new ground and no longer wanted to accept the status quo. Simultaneously, the discussion about Pride within the community has also raised the question of who is welcome to participate in the parades. A recent example which speaks to the urgency of the debate occurred in 2018 when the official Pride parade in London began with a scandal. A group of lesbian activists put transphobic posters at the start of the line-up to delay its launch. On their banners were statements like "Transactivism Erases Lesbians." Again and again, such forms of victim rivalry occur. The exclusion of people of colour and trans people has a sad tradition in the community. To this day, the decisive role such groups have played in the uprisings in New York's Stonewall Inn has not been fully acknowledged nor widely accepted as an undeniable aspect of the movement's history.

Such controversies are closely related to commodification and alignment with the social mainstream of the movement. The smoother and less unruly the parades became, the more attractive they became as a political and commercial platform for financial actors within majority society. At the beginning of this millennium in particular, it almost became a matter of course that besides LGBTQIA+ activists, alliances and other institutions closely associated with the community, political parties and large and small corporations would use the various parades worldwide as a stage. The sheer mass of commercial participants at the demonstration in London left me a little dazed. It felt as if every London-based company was represented by a delegation, the larger ones with immense floats, go-go dancers, giant balloons and all sorts of rainbow trinkets - no expense or

effort was spared to secure an impressive performance at the parade. There is nothing inherently reprehensible about this. There are indeed many companies that have been striving for equal rights and equality for many years and support LGBTQIA+ purposes beyond their own operations. Why shouldn't these institutions partake in Pride demonstrations? A broad social alliance that works against discrimination against people of different sexualities and genders is necessary if we really want to exert a lasting influence on our co-existence. However, I wonder how many companies appear on the big Pride parades and hoist the rainbow flag in the run-up to the event, but invest very little for the rest of the year in the fight for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. The well-founded suspicion of pinkwashing is obvious here.

The term pinkwashing was first used in 1992. Breast Cancer Action, a US-based grassroots organisation, coined this term in response to the abuse of the pink ribbon, a worldwide symbol for the commitment in the fight against breast cancer, which was being used as an inflationary logo on various products without their sales proceeds benefiting breast cancer aid. Over time, the term was increasingly used in the critical LGBTQIA+ scene and describes the strategy of companies, countries or individuals to convey an LGBTQIA+-friendly image to the outside world for marketing reasons, without any actual commitment behind it or even to distract from other entanglements. A more recent example which received significant media coverage occurred in the spring of this year, when a number of internationally operating companies such as HSBC, Delta Airlines and Morgan Stanley, among many others, came under fire for sponsoring a ceremony in honour of Jair Bolsonaro, who has a long history of homophobic and inhumane statements.<sup>1</sup> After the public outcry, some of the companies withdrew their commitment to the gala, including those mentioned here. However, there was more than a sour aftertaste when these three companies did not exactly appear modestly at this year's London Pride, which was also commented on with a few restrained whistles.

Such crude attempts to ingratiate a human rights movement can unfortunately be found again and again and are often revealed with a simple Internet search. But you have to want to know. And here starts another problem. I openly admit it. It can feel fantastic to see so many different groups, movements and even companies on the street demonstrating for my rights. The child in me wants to believe that the world is really changing in big steps, that young people are no longer bullied and mocked because they are gay, lesbian, bi, queer, trans or anything else, that a future where no one is a victim of violence because of their gender identity or sexuality is in sight. I want to believe that more and more people are discovering that colourful diversity is valuable and wonderful. I want to believe that everything just gets better. But in this respect, every new case of pinkwashing frustrates me and makes me more cynical, leading me to the conclusion that the economy is probably very much aware of my desire to live in a society where my gender and sexual identity can simply be and it doesn't need to be addressed. I'm probably not alone with that hope. This perhaps naïve longing might be the reason why pinkwashing is often quite obvious yet overlooked. Maybe we just don't want to take every illusion from ourselves.

But why do so many commercial companies bother to run the risk of pinkwashing? With every appearance at a Pride parade, these companies also have to reckon with losing conservative customers. What is it worth? According to the British market research institute

*LGBT-Capital*, LGBT households<sup>2</sup> worldwide have an annual purchasing power of 3.6 trillion US dollars at their disposal—twice as much as Canada’s total purchasing power.<sup>3</sup> In Germany alone, LGBT households have an estimated 150 billion euros per year available for corporate spending. There are not enough representative studies on the exact number of German LGBT households, but a sole study from 2016 indicated that 7.9% of households in Germany were LGBT, which is about 6.5 million households.<sup>4</sup> This would result in an annual purchasing power of around 23,000 euros for each of these households (this is the money that is available exclusively for consumption, not including rent and other fixed costs). So, on average, we are a pretty attractive target group. It’s no wonder that advertisements are increasingly geared toward us. Pink money is good money. The most obvious products that are presented to us are the various Pride accessories that flood the shops every summer; there’s hardly a product without a rainbow, from sandwiches to clothes to loans. But beyond the Pride season our consumer power is manipulated and the little child with the big dreams comes into play again. The goal of advertising is—to put it simply—to arouse a desire for a product that we didn’t know we needed before. This desire can be awakened in different ways, but most reliably by instrumentalising unfulfilled desires and hopes, and also fears.

In 2001, a manufacturer of deep-frozen products in Germany set out quite prominently to expand its target group with attractive pink money. They launched several commercials in which the same gay couple, Holger and Max, always appeared to promote different products. Holger and Max were a kind of creepy blend of gay clichés, conservative family ideas and a new notion of the extended bourgeoisie. According to a fictional biography, Holger and Max got to know each other during a visit to the Swan Lake Ballet and live in a rather spacious, comfortably modern apartment in a big city—presumably their own property. One is a bit flamboyant and the other is a bit serious—basically a very bland appropriation of the characters Will and Jack from *Will & Grace*, but now as lovers. Holger and Max were the first homosexual couple to appear in German TV commercials, and it was especially striking that this happened via a food manufacturer that had previously relied heavily on heteronormative child and family friendliness. Whether or not the campaign actually increased sales is less interesting than the fact that the commercials very clearly operated to attract those with a longing for family, belonging, bourgeois *normality* and heteronormative ideas of relationships, which had been emerging louder and louder on the streets since the early 1990s. For while the beginnings of the gay and lesbian movement were still looking for a break-up of social structures and devoted themselves to utopias, the focus shifted more and more towards assimilation and integration into the heteronormative world view in order to gain acceptance<sup>5</sup>. The demand for the opening of the institution of marriage for same sex couples, which dominated the Pride parades of the Western world for decades, can be seen as emblematic of this. In advertising, Holger and Max made this call heard much earlier than in politics and in the majority of society. Although they couldn’t have been married in 2001, their image was normalised, and perhaps they even took away some people’s fear of the downfall of the Occident through same-sex marriage. They made a lovely but harmless couple who were just happy about their frozen fish. The little child with the big dreams definitely bites at this point.

1) <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/bolsonaro-backlash-event-honoring-brazilian-leader-calls-question-corporate-support-n1000431>  
Access: 25.10.2019

2) This study references only the LGBT shares of the community.

3) <http://www.lgbt-capital.com/>  
Access: 24.10.2019

4) <https://www.jetzt.de/lgbt/dalia-studie-zu-lgbt-anteil-in-der-bevoelkerung> Access: 24.9.2019

5) This shift happened due to a complex variety of reasons. One has been the appearance of positively connotated lesbian and gay characters on mainstream TV such as in the sitcom *Golden Girls*, for example,

that were broadcasted internationally. In 1991, the episode “Sister of the Bride” was aired, in which Blanche’s gay brother plans a commitment ceremony with his boyfriend. The episode focuses heavily on Blanche’s struggle to accept not the homosexuality of her brother, but his strive towards marriage equality. Only when it is made clear to her that his desire to build a family and live a “normal” life equals her own is she able to come to terms with her brother’s wish. The episode had a huge impact, and Blanche’s perspective was a stand in for the mainstream opinion in the debate against marriage equality at that time. More and more, similar lesbian and gay characters were introduced in shows such as *Seinfeld* or *Frasier*

that appealed to mainstream audiences in their family friendly orientation—often pitched by gay or lesbian members of the writing staff. Consequently, those voices also gained more power within the community and had an impact not only on political claims made on Pride parades but also on how they presented themselves, i.e. as more oriented toward a social mainstream. Mainstream media appearance is only one of many problems of representation that cannot be fully addressed in this essay.

6) Quoted from: David Boaz: *Capitalism, Not Socialism, Led to Gay Rights*, in: <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/capitalism-not-socialism-led-gay-rights> Access: 21.9.2019

Now, of course, the advertised product has very little potential to ensure a non-discriminatory society. Why should it? Then the wish would be fulfilled and it would no longer be possible to use it for commercial purposes. Advertising has little interest in losing its target groups and these are created outstandingly by marking groupings as different from others and creating incentive to identify with one of the offered boxes. Advertising offers us role models to admire, to envy, whose lives we ought to want to live. We should want to be like them and therefore we should buy product X, which promises to fulfill this goal. Holger and Max are a performativity trap. They do not dissolve social division, but only strengthen it by instrumentalising it to use the longing for dissolution as a means to an end.

The commercialisation of the LGBTQIA+ movement, its appropriation by capitalist organizations, is a problem we are quite intimately involved in. There are very understandable arguments that prove that at the end it was the triumph of capitalism that gave us our individual freedom, our human rights and thus also the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. With the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation over a hundred years ago, family structures also changed fundamentally. Suddenly the children went to the city to look for work, where they lived far away from parental morality. The single life emerged as a common social position, and the anonymity of the big cities also ensured that a homosexual subculture could emerge, for example via back rooms, flaps and cruising. The individual and individuality became more and more important in the market structure of capitalism and with expressions of individuality, freedom movements of different groups emerged and fought for their rights. The great dilemma is that, despite all the injustices that capitalism undoubtedly generates, it at the same time offers the space to fight against them. The Australian scholar and gay rights activist Dennis Altmann wrote about it in 1982:

“The real change in the past decade has been a mass political and cultural movement through which gay women and men have defined themselves as a new minority. This development was only possible under modern consumer capitalism, which for all its injustices has created the conditions for greater freedom and diversity that are present in any other society yet known. For those of us who are socialists, this presents an important political dilemma, namely how to guard those qualities of capitalism that allow for individual diversity while jettisoning its inequities, exploitation, waste, and ugliness.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1982, Altmann looked back on slightly more than a decade of Pride. But today, 50 years after the Stonewall Riots, we still face the same challenge. The commodification of the movement has continued to increase, perhaps to the same extent as our rights in most western countries. Perhaps we can even be sure that we will keep these rights for as long as we live in our present economic system, as we have become a quite valuable market. But does this mean, in turn, that we lose our freedom as soon as it is no longer profitable? That’s a pretty nightmarish perception, but perhaps we should be aware of it. I can’t offer a solution at this point, just a reflection on the Möbius band in which we have become entangled.