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**Book Review: Bruce, Katherine McFarland. 2016. *Pride Parades: How a Parade Changed the World*. New York: New York University Press.**

By Jonathan Coley, Monmouth College

This month, LGBT people in cities across the U.S. are celebrating Pride Month. Two weekends ago, Chicago, the city where I write this review, hosted its “Pride Fest” full of concerts, drag shows, and (of course) partying. This past weekend, the city hosted its annual pride parade, a three-hour procession comprised of nearly every LGBT sub-group you could imagine and parent groups, churches, business, and politicians that support the LGBT community. An estimated one million spectators lined the streets to watch the parade.

For as long as LGBT people have organized pride parades and related celebrations, people have debated these events’ true purpose: do pride parades advance LGBT activists’ political goals? Do they move the LGBT community closer to cultural equality? Or are they simply excuses to party?

With the recent election of Donald Trump, who has filled his cabinet with conservatives perceived to be hostile to LGBT rights, these debates are raging even more. A recent New York Times story, titled “Gay Pride’s Choice: March in Protest or Dance Worries Away,” notes that in cities such as Los Angeles, activists are forgoing parades in favor of traditional protest marches that they believe to be better suited to the current moment of political resistance (Severson 2017).

Katherine McFarland Bruce’s *Pride Parades*, then, could not have arrived at a better time. Delving headfirst into debates over the purpose of “Pride,” and contributing to recent scholarly discussions of the cultural impacts of social movements, the book provides a helpful framework with which to understand the role of pride parades in the long march toward LGBT equality.

Traditionally, Bruce notes, social movement scholars studied protests that targeted the state. Through Marches on Washington, and protests outside political conventions, social movements seemed to primarily be in the business of policy change. Viewed in this light, pride parades may indeed seem to be an odd form of social movement activity.

Yet, scholars are increasingly arguing that social movements target institutions outside the state, such as corporations, education, and religion, as well as the broader culture. Bruce defines culture as the “shared set of meanings we use to make sense of and act on the world” (p. 15), existing both in the mind, in the form of “each individual’s internalized set of norms, values, attitudes, and views on the world,” and in the world itself, as “explicit language, symbols, rituals, and meaning” (p. 17).

According to Bruce, pride parades are best understood as a form of cultural contestation. The dominant heteronormative cultural code that so many people are socialized into defines

heterosexual relationships as normal and ideal and same-sex relationships as deviant and inferior. People in the U.S. today are also socialized into an alternative cultural code of tolerance that allows LGBT communities to coexist with other social groups, but this code of tolerance does not directly challenge heteronormativity.

As Bruce shows through her observations at 6 geographically-diverse pride parades and interviews with 50 participants, pride parades attempt to upend the heteronormative cultural code through defiant and educational forms of visibility. Through defiant visibility, LGBT people present themselves without concern for how the rest of the world will view them, including through overt displays of sexuality or nonnormative presentations of gender. Alternatively, through educational visibility, LGBT people attempt to combat stereotypes of LGBT people by presenting themselves as family-, business-, or academically-oriented. The two strategies of increasing LGBT visibility coexist uneasily, but both attempt to upend the dominant heteronormative cultural code.

Allies also participate in Pride Parades, and they attempt to challenge the heteronormative cultural code through explicit displays of support for the LGBT community. As noted, those who attend Pride Parades can generally count on a broad array of parent groups, church groups, school groups, and businesses to march in support of LGBT rights. Some of these latter groups, especially businesses, have come under critique for their inclusion in Pride Parades (Severson 2017), as business participation in Pride can reinforce cultural stereotypes of LGBT people as rich and ultimately friendly to capitalist interests. Yet, Bruce argues that business involvement in Pride can be viewed in a more optimistic light; businesses are often selling products at Pride that allow LGBT people to make themselves more visible, and they often allow people to attend Pride free of charge.

Of course, Bruce does not deny that Pride Parades also provide an excuse to simply celebrate or party – they indeed can be quite fun – but even then, she notes that Pride Parades serve as a form of prefigurative politics, providing LGBT people a chance to act out the kind of world they hope to make widespread – a world where LGBT people can be themselves without fear of cultural condemnation.

In providing these important insights on the purpose of pride parades, the book contributes to a growing body of scholarship on social movements that bypass the state and facilitate cultural change. The book's pithy ways of defining culture and outlining strategies of cultural change make the sometimes complex arguments of the multi-institutional politics and new social movements literatures more comprehensible to a wider audience.

At times, *Pride Parades* does seem to reinforce a dichotomy between state-centric challenges and cultural challenges that the multi-institutional politics literature has attempted to challenge. Bruce argues that “culture stands in contrast with the state” (p. 16) and presents the choice between “trying to change the laws that define legal and illegal behavior” or “trying to change those cultural meanings and attitudes that guide our decisions about how to treat one another” (p. 10) as two different strategies. But scholars such as Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) have challenged this dichotomy, urging attention to the ways in which cultural change is central to political (and other institutional) struggles. Is it not possible, for example, that in challenging the

heteronormative cultural code, participants of pride parades helped make marriage equality laws possible?

Still, it may very well be that most pride parade organizers and participants understand their own mission as primarily oriented to cultural change over political change, and her framework is certainly a helpful one for understanding pride parades. *Pride Parades* is a detailed, lively, and moving portrait of pride parades nationwide, a love letter to the important work LGBT activists past and present have accomplished in creating space for displays of LGBT pride. I heartily recommend it to anyone hoping to understand this unique form of cultural protest and to those hoping to understand the cultural consequences of social movements.

## References

Armstrong, Elizabeth, and Mary Bernstein. 2008. "Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Approach to Social Movements." *Sociological Theory* 26 (1): 74–99.

Severson, Kim. 2017, June 19. "Gay Pride's Choice: March in Protest or Dance Worries Away." *The New York Times*.