

Broadly speaking, this study's comparative analysis of queer organizing in the United States and South Africa reveals a profound continuity in the core principles of radical queer praxis – even as these movements articulate their struggles using different vocabularies and operate within distinct socio-political landscapes, the absence of the formalized label “queer” does not preclude a commitment to anti-normative, community-based organizing; rather, it often signals a context-specific rearticulation of the very principles that queer theory champions.

In the United States, queer organizing has historically operated at the intersection of explicit nomenclature and the relentless pressures of state-led assimilation. Early movements – ranging from the insurgencies of ACT UP and the Stonewall Rebellion to contemporary mutual aid networks – demonstrated a gradual shift towards state-based activism over time; while many groups initially focused on community-oriented strategies to help those in need, the subsequent co-optation of such movements within state-sanctioned legal “LGBT” frameworks reoriented sexual organizing in the United States around the government. Thus, as legal victories such as marriage equality were celebrated, such gains were double-edged, offering a form of institutional recognition while simultaneously reinforcing a model of inclusion that privileged measurable rights over the more elusive, yet essential, processes of community care and self-determination. From these deficiencies, queer academic and political movements thus emerged to fill the gaps in the negligent policy pushed forward by sexual civil rights movements, positioning the U.S. case as a baseline and illustrating how the overt declaration of queer identity has formed in response against lackluster sexual rights policy.

Contrasting sharply with the U.S. model, the South African case study provides a vivid illustration of queer organizing that thrives largely outside state mechanisms. Despite progressive constitutional protections and landmark legal reforms, many South African activists have found that state interventions rarely translate into material security or genuine social transformation. Grassroots organizations – exemplified by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Gender DynamiX, and the Triangle Project – emerged in response to glaring public health crises and persistent socio-economic inequities. These groups embody the radical ethos of anti-assimilation by prioritizing direct community care, mutual aid, and localized mobilization over the pursuit of formal rights that, in practice, fail to dismantle structural inequities, demonstrating that when state mechanisms fall short – when legal reforms, however progressive on paper, continue to

leave marginalized communities economically and socially stranded – the answer lies in developing alternative infrastructures. These infrastructures are not beholden to the state’s logics of inclusion but are instead predicated on organic, horizontal networks that generate resilient spaces of care and empowerment. In this way, South African queer organizing substantiates the thesis that the core tenets of queer theory both can and are operationalized outside the confines of explicit “queer” language or state validation.

At the primary level, both case studies converge on a central critique of the state’s role in mediating queer life. Whether through the legalistic frameworks that characterize U.S. advocacy or the constitutional promises that remain unfulfilled in South Africa, a consistent pattern emerges: state-led initiatives, while beneficial in certain respects, inherently operate within a paradigm that privileges inclusion over liberation. In each context, the reliance on state recognition, whether it through court rulings, legislative reform, or policy implementation, inevitably reinforces a form of carceral logic that defines whose lives are granted legitimacy and whose remain marginal. This logic, steeped in historical practices of exclusion and assimilation, is antithetical to the radical, transformative vision that queer organizing aspires to. Thus, rather than breaking down boundaries, state-centric approaches often recast those boundaries in new forms, thereby perpetuating a cycle of containment that queer activists have long sought to disrupt.

More specifically, however, it is within this cycle of containment that the true promise of community-based organizing becomes evident. By decoupling their struggle from the mechanisms of state validation, activists in each case study have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for self-determination and innovation. These movements have not only resisted the pressures to conform to neoliberal templates of inclusivity but have also actively reimaged the contours of social, economic, and political belonging; community care is not earned based on identity, but rather shared based on individual need and the pursuit of collective liberation. In the United States, this has meant cultivating mutual aid networks and localized support systems that operate in parallel with, or sometimes in opposition to, mainstream LGBT institutions. In South Africa, it has involved the creation of comprehensive community care models that directly address the material needs left unmet by formal legal reforms. Regardless of location, community-led initiatives pushing for sexual liberation have resisted traditional, state-based

pursuits of “equality” as a means to prioritize meeting individual needs and fostering community, even without a reliance on concrete identity.

By examining these diverse models of organizing, this discussion brings to light two central themes. First, queer politics—when decoupled from the imperative of state recognition – can carve out more liberatory pathways that are attuned to the lived experiences of marginalized communities. While the LGBT framework often presents itself as a cohesive “community,” it ultimately fails to offer meaningful relief or liberation to sexual minorities on a global scale. There are no substantive ties of belonging within the LGBT paradigm; its state-centric orientation leads primarily to assimilation within existing heteronormative structures. It is precisely out of this inadequacy that more radical, queer forms of organizing emerge – models that prioritize genuine care and support for those in need, irrespective of personal identity or relationship to the state. This insight is particularly urgent in the face of escalating state-led attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, which lay bare the limitations of legal reform as a sole metric of progress. In contexts where trans and non-binary individuals are targeted through efforts to reassert fixed, biological definitions of gender, the ability to organize beyond the state becomes not only a strategic necessity but a radical act of resistance.

Second, the comparative case studies reinforce the central argument that the transformative potential of queer organizing, in the end, lies in its ability to generate communities of care and resistance, not in the formal language used to describe it. These communities, whether operating in the U.S. or South Africa, reveal that radical politics is not contingent upon the overt adoption of “queer” as a term; instead, it is rooted in practices that challenge the normative logics of power and exclusion. By foregrounding grassroots strategies that prioritize direct action, community care, and anti-normative resilience, this discussion offers a hopeful vision for the future of sexual activism, underscoring that the work of liberation does not require discursive legitimacy to be real or impactful. In a world where state mechanisms continue to impose rigid boundaries on marginalized lives, the capacity to build self-determined, autonomous networks represents a powerful alternative centered around reclaiming the possibility of liberation in its most radical form. Thus, it is through this analysis that it becomes clear that global queer organizing, regardless of its linguistic or institutional articulation, is fundamentally about creating spaces of freedom in the face of relentless exclusion. This

discussion thus reaffirms that the principles of queer theory – its rejection of heteronormativity, its critique of state power, and its insistence on community-based solidarity – are not only relevant but essential to understanding and advancing the struggle for genuine liberation worldwide.