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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hiding in Plain Sight: The Mattachine Society's Use of Loose Coupling as a Strategy for Covert Political Action

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Abstract

Covert political organizing is a vital means by which subordinate groups express grievances against authorities or elites. This article develops an understanding of the process of covert organizing to show how the selection of an organizational structure is a strategic decision. Using original, archival data from the Mattachine Society, a homosexual organization founded in 1950, and the affiliated Mattachine Foundation, I show how the structure of the organizations enabled leaders to segment their audiences and adapt to challenges from outside and inside the group. In particular, I use the concept of a loosely coupled system, emphasizing relations between organizations, to show how organizations can work with varying degrees of discretion. Moreover, building off analytically similar cases in the literature, I demonstrate that a loosely coupled system enables both organizational flexibility and covert political action.

If, as Robert Michels (1915: 21) says, "organization is the weapon of the weak in [the] struggle with the strong," then the ability for a challenging group to organize strategically can provide the ammunition necessary for victory. Constraints imposed by government regulations or the sociopolitical climate can make organizing difficult and victory even more so. As such, organizing strategically and engaging in some work covertly may enable organizations to skirt regulations or gain favor with a broader audience.

There are many documented instances of the ways in which organizations have managed to function given political or social constraints (e.g., Dharan 2002; Starks 2009). In particular, there are several case examples of organizations creating or utilizing another organization to hide some component of their work that is either illegal (Singh 2010) or would render goal accomplishment far more difficult (Walker 2009). This article will show that organizing covertly is a strategy that enables groups to function given any number of constraints placed upon members. Moreover, it will emphasize organizing as a process to show how certain forms enable groups to adapt to both external and internal threats.

This article will examine several types of organizations that have been well-studied and will use one particular case—the Mattachine Society—to examine the strategy of covert organizing. Specifically, it offers the opportunity to explore the process of selecting a form, and explain how a structure with separate but functional parts gives organizers the flexibility to work in a repressive environment and combat conflict from within.

The Mattachine Society was one of the first and arguably most influential homosexual organizations in the mid-twentieth century. When it was founded in 1950, its five founders were members of the American Communist Party or were considered "fellow travelers"; all were well aware that any organizing was conflated with communist organizing. Moreover, as homosexuality was a punishable offense, the founders sought to protect their own identities and those of the organization's members. They selected a cell-like structure meant to keep the identities of all members secret, even from those who would eventually join the organization. But if these individuals were going to change society, they needed to find a way to publicize their work and mobilize more members of the community. To do this, they created another organization, the Mattachine Foundation, that allowed them to engage in some work publicly. As the organization grew, however, a faction developed within the Society that, concerned about a red influence at the top, sought to force out the founders.

The use of a façade would be expected in a hostile environment, as it enables members to engage in action covertly while also interacting with a broader public. This article argues, however, that the Mattachine Foundation not only buffered the founders of the Society from a hostile external environment but also from threats from within. As such, this article has two primary aims, one substantive and one theoretical. First, substantively, although the Mattachine Society has been the focus of several academic papers (e.g., Meeker 2001) and historical books (e.g., Sears 2006; Timmons 1990), a close examination of the organization's archives reveal that much of what has been written is oversimplified or incorrect. By using previously uncited documents, this article will refine the common narrative to emphasize how the structure chosen by the founders was a tactical decision that enabled them to engage in some work publicly and buffer themselves from threats from within. I will clarify this narrative to achieve the second aim of the study: develop an understanding of the process of covert organizing, with an emphasis on organizational form as a tactic.

Covert Political Conflict

Political conflict refers to challenges to some form of authority or governance (McAdam et al. 2003). Covert political conflict implies that this contention must occur without detection from certain audiences, particularly authorities or the elites (Morrill et al. 2003: 394), as it typically involves forbidden forms of dissent (Scott 2008). It is a vital means by which subordinate groups express grievances that are typically directed at institutionalized power (Morrill et al. 2003: 392). Groups will likely utilize covert action when they perceive that they are victims of a collective injustice and when they are otherwise prevented from engaging in social action.

Although covert conflict may pave the way for large-scale confrontation (Scott 1989), organizations will typically avoid direct engagement with authorities (Morrill et al. 2003: 394). Repression can thus lead activists to identify tactics that allow them to organize secretly.

Research on covert political action primarily focuses on covert action within organizations or institutions, often looking at efforts to change an organization from within (e.g., ibid.). There is far less, however, that examines how organizations function in the context of broader covert political conflict. This article argues that one such tactic is the selection of an organizational structure that helps organizations avoid detection and maintain flexibility. In particular, groups that are marginalized by existing political institutions have an incentive to develop alternative models of organization (Clemens 1993: 755). The question becomes, then, what form does such organizing take?

Organizational Form and the Environment

Organizations are shaped by their environments or fields (Barnett and Carol 1995). The organizational field refers to the organizations that constitute a given area of institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This field provides the guidelines for both the structure and the rules governing the behavior of the nascent organization (ibid.; Meyer and Rowan 1977). In hostile environments, organizations will typically choose a structure that buffers members from external threats.

Organizations may be able to insulate themselves from threat by adopting a loosely coupled structure. Loose coupling allows an organization to utilize several, specialized, independent units, each with a distinct aim within the organization (Thompson 1967). By segmenting, the organization leaders also have the opportunity to create different identities that align with different interests that audiences, including group members, may hold (Hsu and Hannan 2005: 476). Loosely coupled systems enable organizations to engage in work with a degree of discretion, particularly when work may be perceived as (or is) illegal (Orton and Weick 1990: 210). Utilizing this type of structure, if one unit is not functioning successfully, it can either adopt the structure of a different facet or it can disband without destroying the organization.

The concept of loose coupling enables a researcher to focus on relations within and between organizations (Beekun and Glick 2001), thus emphasizing the tactical advantages of specific organizational structures. To focus on these relations and their functionality, it is necessary to identify the elements that are connected in the structure; the dimensions of those connections, which incorporates the quality of the relationship between the units; and the mechanisms that enable the pieces to function together (ibid.: 229–33). These components will be highlighted in the following text to draw comparisons between organizational types.

One example of a loosely coupled structure is the use of a front organization, a strategy linked to communist organizing (Carr 1985; Morris 1956). International communist organizations utilized front organizations to build sympathy for communist aims and to attract noncommunist sympathizers to various causes (Morris 1956: 77–78). Unlike in historical accounts, very little sociological literature has

addressed front organizations conceptually or in practice. This article argues, however, that a front organization is similar to several other types of organizations and organizational forms, all of which are conceptually akin to loosely coupled structures. In particular, the following section shows that covert organizing strategies adopted by challenging groups to engage in covert political conflict are analogous to strategies used by corporations and special purpose groups to engage in work that would otherwise harm the parent organization.

Organizational Forms in the Literature

Traditionally, research on loose coupling focused on individual organizations and the units within them. More recently, however, the concept has been developed as a way to understand relations between organizations more broadly (Beekun and Glick 2001). Using the expanded conceptualization developed by Beekun and Glick, this article argues that when faced with threat, in lieu of creating new units, as the traditional view would suggest, an organization can create or work with an entirely separate organization to achieve the same aim but without putting the parent organization at risk. Thus, by emphasizing relations between organizations, parachurches, special purpose entities (SPEs), and grassroots lobbying firms (GLFs), will be conceptualized here as loosely coupled systems that strategically selected their structures for covert organizing.

Parachurches are akin to what Wuthnow (1988) refers to as "special purpose groups." They are "religious organizations that are non-denominational in nature ... [that] have arisen to combat what 'religious conservatives' see as government intrusion into the family and to advance their own 'Christian family' agenda" (Starks 2009: 2). That is, they engage in work under the guise of religion, but without a formal association to a given church or denomination (Scheitle et al. 2017). This enables the parachurch to engage in "religious" work without having to abide by the same government regulations as formal, nonprofit churches. Although parachurches, as 501(c)(3) public charities, are like churches, restricted from engaging in certain lobbying activities, they tend to do work that is broader than that of religious congregations. Thus, while they may be associated with specific congregations and denominations, their work is more generalized and can reach wider audiences (Scheitle and McCarthy 2018: 239–40).

While parachurches are used to engage larger audiences on behalf of religious groups, corporations may similarly use SPEs to engage in tasks that would put them at financial or legal risk if discovered (Singh 2010). A SPE is one that is independent and separate from a sponsor organization that legally creates it but is not consolidated with the sponsor account. SPEs in and of themselves are not illegal. They are created for the purpose of conducting a specific activity and have been the preferred way for corporations to finance large projects (Tinker and Carter 2003). The now classic example of an organization utilizing an SPE to hide business transactions is Enron. In this case, the organization used SPE accounting to engage in financial engineering to hide profits or assets when they became problematic (Dharan 2002: 301). Certain types of SPEs, however, do explicitly engage in illegal activities. A shell corporation, for example, is a subtype of SPE with practically little or no assets or operational activities, used

as a separate legal entity and as a veil for the nonexistent recorded business transactions for tax evasion, fraud, or money laundering (Singh 2010).

These first two organizational forms—parachurches and SPEs—are established directly by what SPE scholars call sponsor organizations. They are intentionally created to enable an organization to engage in work they otherwise could not. The elements of the loosely coupled system here are represented by a parent organization, for example Enron, and the SPE. The strength of the coupling is strong, as they are directly related to each other (Weick 1982). The patterns of the relationship, however, are difficult to discern, as the SPEs are meant to hide transactions and parachurches are largely meant to be independent of a church. In the case of SPEs and corporations, the mechanisms that enable them to function as a loosely coupled system would include a clear pattern of relationships outlined by formal arrangements between the two elements (Beekun and Glick 2001).

Alternatively, corporations may hire existing GLFs to increase public participation on pertinent legislative issues, while concealing their role. GLFs are "professional firms that subsidize citizen participation in the political process. . . . [They] provoke citizen action in their favor" (Walker 2009: 84). The elements connected here are GLFs and corporations. The quality of the relationship between the elements is strong and direct, as the two would be connected by a contract, governed by formal arrangements between the two.

All three of these organizational types—parachurches, SPEs, and GLFs—have characteristics of loosely coupled systems. The elements in each structure are clear and enable a sponsor organization to develop specialized, independent units with a distinct aim (Thompson 1967). Additionally, these different elements—or organizations—can align with the interests of different audiences (Hsu and Hannan 2005), whether that audience includes members of the sponsor organization, government officials, or members of a community that may be impacted by a corporation's work. Although the dimensions of the structure and the mechanisms that allow them to function may differ, the adoption of a loosely coupled system enables the sponsor to work with discretion (Orton and Weick 1990).

What these three types of organizations—parachurches, SPEs, and GLFs—have in common is that the presence of both the sponsor organization and the front/shell/parachurch is equally visible. What is covert, in a sense, is their connection to the sponsor organization. That is one component that sets them apart from the current case, as the parent organization (the Mattachine Society) was largely only visible to members and not to external audiences. They are analytically similar, however, in that their creation, or in the case of GLFs, their use, is in response to some sort of external threat.

Specifically, parachurches are created in response to the perceived threat of government intrusion into the family (Starks 2009). An additional external contingency is also the legal restriction on lobbying and political work (Scheitle et al. 2017). SPEs, however, are created when corporations experience the threat of exposing financial engineering used to hide assorted bad news (Dharan 2002). Finally, GLFs are hired when a corporation experiences threats posed by regulation and citizen organizing (Walker 2009). The literature examining these various organizations has highlighted how they function and why they are necessary. What is lacking, however, is an understanding of the process of how the loosely coupled system, as an

organizational form, was developed and, more importantly, how the process of using this structure enabled them to function over time. Moreover, these cases do not show how these organizations, as loosely coupled systems, enable groups to adapt to changes outside and within, a primary aim here.

Covertness as an Organizational Strategy

The current study asks how a group of individuals can engage in political conflict while avoiding detection and directly engaging with various audiences. This article argues that it occurs in large part through the selection of an organizational form, and a loosely coupled system in particular, as it enables organizations to avoid detection or hide some aspect of its work (Orton and Weick 1990). In the sections that follow, the history of Mattachine will be explained to show how a loosely coupled system develops. In particular, I identify the elements that are connected, the dimensions of the relationship between the elements, and the mechanisms that enabled them to function. This will show how the selection of a loosely coupled system is a strategy that enabled an organization to function covertly, segment its audiences, and adapt to changes both external and internal.

Data and Methods

The current section will begin with a brief review of the three narratives used to explain the history of the Mattachine Society. From there, I will use primary archives to clarify the history. The narrative developed in this section achieves the first aim of this article: to refine the existing account of Mattachine, emphasizing the difference between the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation and the role that each played, particularly for the organizational founders. From there, the narrative will be used to explain how the selection of a loosely coupled organizational form was a tactical strategy that enabled the organization to segment its work, avoid detection, and engage different audiences.

The Mattachine Society

The Mattachine Society was founded in 1950, one of the most repressive periods for homosexuals in American history (Loftin 2007), and several of its founders had been actively involved in the American Communist Party. It is no surprise, then, that the form the Mattachine Society took was a reflection of the sociopolitical environment and the experiences of its founders. Specifically, the founders adopted a cell-like structure used by eighteenth-century Freemasons to ensure secrecy within and outside the organization. The first order units, also called guilds, were made up of individuals who ran discussion groups. These groups were "semiprivate," though their affiliation with the formal organization was kept secret (Timmons 1990). The second order included representatives from the first order, who took on a more prominent role than other group leaders, and several members from the higher, Fifth Order . Although third and fourth orders were included in the original model of the organization, they never came to fruition as the organization developed. The

Fifth Order was comprised of Mattachine's founders and was later joined by two other members. Individuals at this level were fully entrenched in the organization and kept their identities hidden from other members of the Society until 1953.

Fear of exposure dominated meetings and made recruitment difficult. "Since any public mention of homosexuality was equated with scandal, few workplaces would retain an employee whose involvement with such an organization became public" (Timmons 1990: 147). As such, members and guests frequently used pseudonyms or brought along a female companion to serve as a "date" in the event that the discussion groups were raided.[1] The purpose of the discussion groups was twofold. First, the groups allowed participants to debate the concept of homosexuals as a minority and discuss forms of political action that could be taken to ensure equality for all minorities. Second, and perhaps more important, the discussion groups served as the primary method of recruitment. Individuals who attended several groups and appeared enthusiastic were told privately about the organization behind these meetings and were invited to join the Mattachine Society.

As the number of members grew, the founders created the Mattachine Foundation in 1952 so that they could publicize some of the organization's work and raise money to expand their reach. Although this structure was selected because it helped maintain the anonymity of the organization's work and its members, the structure created problems when a small discussion group in Long Beach became alarmed by the level of secrecy within the organization. These concerns grew when the original founder, Harry Hay, was connected to the American Communist Party in an article published in the *Los Angeles Daily Mirror*. Along with the group in Long Beach, a small faction from San Francisco demanded individuals sign a loyalty oath denouncing communism as a condition of group membership. As a response to the concerned faction, the founders held a constitutional convention in 1953 to determine if the organization should adopt an open, democratic structure.

Although the history of the Mattachine Society has been examined previously (see the following text), existing narratives and studies of this early homosexual organization overlook many of the intricacies of the organization's form. This confusion is largely the result of lack of clarity surrounding the relationship and timeline of the Mattachine Society and the affiliated Mattachine Foundation. The two are often blurred or conflated, and as such, it can be difficult to ascertain the life cycle of this pivotal organization or, really, organizations. Independently, each of these narratives provides a rich account of an organization and its radical founders and most discuss the factions that developed, leading to the eventual overhaul of Mattachine[2] in 1953. Read together, however, some inconsistencies arise, typically in relation to the Mattachine Society, the original organization, and the Mattachine Foundation, the additional organization set up by the Society's founders. In particular, there are three different ways in which the histories of the two groups are discussed: as a single organization, as one that changed over time, and as one organization with another that served as a façade.

[1]Although there were several women in the Mattachine Society, the organization was dominated by men. The women who accompanied men to these early meetings, however, were usually lesbians and participated in the discussion groups.

[2]I use "Mattachine" to refer to both the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation, jointly.

Narrative 1: One Single Organization

In the most simplified narratives of early gay activism, there are typically no references to the Mattachine Foundation or the Mattachine Society (Bullough 2002; Marcus 2002; Sears 2006; White 2009). Instead, the organizations are jointly referred to as either Mattachine or *the* Mattachine. Occasionally, throughout the historical discussion, quotes from archives are included that do refer to either the Mattachine Society, Mattachine Foundation, or both. Within this group of narratives, however, it is typically unclear to the reader that there were two separate organizations. While most of the books that fall into this category are general surveys of gay activism, one leaves out details in a way that is particularly confusing in that it is framed as a chronicle of Mattachine.

Weaving together a series of quotes from letters, interviews, and organizational documents, Sears (2006) describes the history of Mattachine largely through the lens of the dissenting faction. Sears primarily uses original documents and interviews, though often without context. As such, when references to the Foundation and Society emerge, they are often conflated. For example, in back-to-back paragraphs, Sears (ibid.: 152) includes a portion of the "Official Statement of Policy on Political Question and Related Matter," which was printed by and references the Mattachine Foundation and then a quote from a group member that discusses the goals for the Society. Unfortunately, as there is no further explanation of these archival documents, there is little clarity concerning the presence of two organizations.

The general surveys of early activism do not suffer from the same degree of confusion, in part because they reflect attempts to cover a much larger period without claiming the same level of detail as the chronicle offered by Sears (ibid.). Marcus (2002: xiii), for example, provides a history of gay activism "through the stories and recollections of more than sixty people" who contributed to the fight for equal rights. Many stories include memories of the Mattachine Society, though the Foundation is never mentioned. Similarly, Bullough (2002) edited a collection of biographies about major gay and lesbian activists before Stonewall. Bullough writes the chapter on Harry Hay and the only mention of the Foundation comes when he writes that Hay had to publicly distance himself from both the Society and the Foundation, though this is the first and only mention of a Foundation (ibid.: 80).

Finally, White (2009) discusses early activism in Los Angeles beginning in the 1940s. The book begins with a chapter on Mattachine and its run from 1948, when Hay first had the idea for a homosexual organization, up until 1952. Although the Foundation did exist in 1952, White's narrative for this period refers to Mattachine and the Mattachine Society, but the Foundation is left out.

In sum, the most simplified version of a Mattachine history is just that, some combination of the Society and the Foundation merged into one. Thus, readers of this version of an organizational history are not getting the comprehensive story that they may suggest. Moreover, it does not allow the reader to understand how the organization was able to function largely because of the form selected.

Narrative 2: One Organization That Changed Over Time

A second narrative describes the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation not as contemporaneous, but as a single organization that changed

in 1953. Specifically, these narratives state that the group began as the Mattachine Foundation (Hall 2010: 539). After the 1953 convention, when a new group of leaders takes over the organization, the Mattachine Society begins (Meeker 2001: 80).

The most prominent and detailed of these narratives comes from Meeker (2001), who justifies his labeling of the Foundation as the first organization and the Society as the second organization to distinguish between the period when the organization was led by Hay versus the postconvention years through 1961. That is, the name becomes a semantic shortcut, meant to ensure clarification regarding the import of the post-1953 Mattachine Society. In Hall's (2010) account, reference to the Foundation is a parenthetical, seemingly an interesting note to the reader that the Society had, at one time, another name.

In one of the most recent attempts to focus on the role of pre-Stonewall organizing, Stein (2012) explains that, "we do not have an up-to-date account of the movement that is national in scope, comprehensive in chronology, and synthetic in ambition" (2). Beginning with the founding of the homophile movement in 1950–51, Stein discusses Mattachine as a single organization. He writes that a small group of men "founded the Mattachine Society" (46), and that "in the summer of 1952, Mattachine's leaders began the process of incorporating the Mattachine Foundation as a nonprofit educational organization" (50). These mark the only mentions of the Society and the Foundation, making it appear as though there was a transition from Society to Foundation. Thus, we are ostensibly given the history of a single group.

The texts that suggest the Foundation and the Society were a single organization that changed in 1953 may not be meant to provide a complete history. Where this is problematic, however, is in narratives that suggest a history early homophile activism, but utilize, without elaboration, short cuts created by others (e.g., Hall 2010). Moreover, as with the versions that conflate the Society and Foundation, it is not possible to see how the two, as a loosely coupled system, enabled Mattachine to function and the founders to continue their work when the dissenting faction sought to oust them.

The Foundation as a Façade

A final narrative tells the history of the Mattachine Society and notes that the Foundation was developed to enable the former to function (D'Emilio 1983; Hay 1996; Timmons 1990). These histories tend to be the most accurate, though they do not discuss the role that the Foundation played leading up to the 1953 convention. Rather, the Foundation is seen as *just* a façade. That is, an organization without an independent and malleable purpose or function. The three books that fall into this category are more comprehensive than the other narratives and were written as either a biography of Harry Hay (Hay 1996; Timmons 1990) or a history of early homosexual politics (D'Emilio 1983).

Both Timmons (1990) and Hay (1996) examine the life of Harry Hay and his role in Gay Liberation. Both utilize primary documents, with the latter coming together through a collection of essays written by Hay and edited by Will Roscoe. Timmons supplements his biography of Hay with interviews and personal correspondence. They note that as the number of discussion groups began to grow,

the Mattachine Foundation was created. Timmons (1990: 162) specifically calls the Foundation a "front group" that was headed by Hay's mother along with another founder's mother and sister. Alternatively, Hay (1996) writes that the Foundation was set up to serve as an official sponsor of the Society, implicitly noting that it was a front in that, "when individuals who seemed Gay attended discussion groups regularly (and appeared trustworthy), the organizers invited them to join the secret Mattachine *Society*" (77, emphasis in original). This is where Hay's (1996) discussion of the Foundation ends, however.

Timmons, by contrast, continues to flesh out the details of the Mattachine Society and Foundation. He notes that another organization, the Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment, was set up by the Mattachine Foundation to support an organization founder fighting entrapment charges. Timmons (1990: 165–66) writes that, "this was an ideal use of the Foundation façade; if the Mattachine Society itself had organized it, the Committee could have been quickly discredited as made of 'partisan' homosexuals, and its members might face harassment and arrest." Once Hay was outed as a Marxist teacher by a local paper, Timmons writes that Hay retired "from public association with the Mattachine Society and Foundation" (ibid.: 174). Although Timmons makes a direct reference to both the Society and the Foundation here, this is the final mention of the latter. He goes on with the history of the organization and Hay's role speaking only of the Mattachine Society or Mattachine.

Noting the focus on post-Stonewall gay organizing in histories of homosexual activism, D'Emilio (1983) seeks to elaborate on the history of gay organizing that preceded gay liberation. He notes that as the Mattachine Society grew, it created the Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment.[3] From there, he states, the founders were "emboldened by the positive response that the Citizens Committee generated" and they "decided to incorporate in California as a not-for-profit education organization. They saw the Mattachine Foundation, as they called it, as a means of advancing their work" (ibid.: 73). One of the benefits of the Foundation, he writes, is that it could serve as a front that enabled the group to engage in work more publicly.

D'Emilio's (1983) version of the history of Mattachine broadly continues with the Foundation sending letters to members of the Los Angeles city council and school board. This letter spawned a red-baiting article in a local paper that resulted in several members calling for a loyalty oath, questioning who was running the group, and the eventual convention of 1953. At this point in the narrative, D'Emilio drops all references to the Foundation, speaking only of the Mattachine Society or Mattachine.

Thus, these three histories differentiate between the Society and the Foundation, specifically noting that the latter was created to enable the former to function and expand. That is the extent of the discussion of the Foundation. As I show in the following text, however, both groups were engaging in different work and, particularly leading up to the 1953 convention, the Foundation began to shift its focus and was potentially to become its own, independent entity. By incorporating these

[3]The Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment was created by the Fifth Order to publicize a case of police entrapment without revealing the existence of Mattachine. It existed in name only, however, unlike the Mattachine Foundation, Inc., as explained in the following text.

details into the history of Mattachine, it is possible to understand how organizing covertly is a process. The use of a loosely coupled system makes the organizations more malleable, able to adapt to changes both internal and external to the group.

History from the Archives

This section will clarify the relationship between the Mattachine Society and Foundation. In doing so, it is possible to identify the three primary components of a loosely coupled system: the elements that are connected, the quality of relations between those elements, and the mechanisms that enable the pieces to function.

Early ideas for the Mattachine Society for appear in documents from 1950, both in drafts of the organization's structure and preliminary concepts. Throughout 1950, Harry Hay and the other founders were still debating a name for the organization that would be a "service and welfare organization devoted to the protection and improvement of Society's Androgynous Minority" (MacDonald 1950).[4] In July 1950, the working name was the "International Bachelors Fraternal Orders for Peace and Social Dignity, sometimes referred to as Bachelor's Anonymous" (ibid). By November of that year, three new names were proposed: Minorities Fellowship for Civil Security, Social Minorities LTD for Civil Security, and Les Mattachines (Society of Fools). On a typed document, the first two names were typed, but crossed out. The third name, "Les Mattachines (Society of Fools)" is handwritten at the top (Hay 1950). A slogan, also written at the top, reads, "Children and Fools Speak the Truth." From this point on, the name Mattachine sticks and, officially, the group calls itself the Mattachine Society.

In the "Missions and Purposes" of the Mattachine Society, written in April 1951, the main goals of the organization are to unify, educate, and lead. According to this early document,

> The Society, founded upon the highest ethical and social principles, serves as an example for homosexuals to follow, and provides a dignified standard upon which the rest of society can base a more intelligent and accurate picture of the nature of homosexuality than currently obtains the public mind. The Society provides the instrument necessary to work with civic-minded and socially valuable organizations, and supplies the means for the assistance of our people who are victimized daily as a result of our oppression. (Mattachine Society 1951)

The Missions and Purposes go on to state that to unify, the Mattachine Society would bring together isolated homosexuals, which would allow members to "derive a feeling of belonging." Under the goal of education, the Mattachine Society would educate "homosexuals and the public at large." Finally, the mission laid out under the guise of leadership was a call to all socially conscious homosexuals to provide leadership to others. More specifically, the document stated, "once unification and education have progressed, it becomes imperative (to consolidate these gains) for

[4]The author of the "Preliminary Concepts" is attributed to Eann MacDonald, a pseudonym used by Harry Hay.

the Corporation to push forward into the realm of political action to erase from our law books the discriminatory and oppressive legislation presently directed against the homosexual minority" (ibid).

References to The Mattachine Foundation first appear in documents dated 1952 and, while obviously connected to the Society, it had its own missions, by-laws, and purpose. In the Foundation's by-laws, the following people are listed as project administrators: Rudi Gernreich, Henry Hay, Dale Jennings, Robert B. Hull, Konrad Stevens, James F. Gruber, and Charles D. Rowland. These are also the men who comprise the leadership of the Mattachine Society, known as the Fifth Order. In the by-laws, it further states that all the project administrators shall be publicly anonymous until and unless the Administrative Council designates them as community advisors for a specific, temporary period. The only people who were publicly associated with the group, largely for the purposes of incorporation, were Mrs. D. T. Campbell, Miss Romayne Cox, and Mrs. Henry Hay—family members of two of the founders. This substantiates the idea that the Foundation was created as a "front organization." That is, it was directly connected to the Society, through the founders, though the connection was meant to be secret.

The purpose of the Mattachine Foundation was, publicly at least, "to study the questions of sexual deviance and their relation to American society as a whole" (Mattachine Foundation, Inc. 1952a). In a document dated February 1953, the Interim Committee of the Administrative Council of the Mattachine Foundation, Inc. drafted an official policy statement to clarify its aims and its relationship to other organizations. Regarding its aims, the Committee wrote the following:

> The Mattachine Foundation, Inc. is a non-profit corporation organized in conformity with the corporate laws of the State of California to study questions of sexual deviation and their relation to American Society as a whole . . .
>
> The sole concern of the Foundation is with the problems of sexual deviation and related subjects, and it takes no stand on political, religious or cultural or racial matters whatsoever except insofar as they are manifestly related to the problems of sexual deviation. (Mattachine Foundation, Inc. 1953)

Thus, unlike the Mattachine Society, which did have explicitly political aims, the Foundation was framed as an organization dedicated to understanding questions of sexual deviation and American Society. As it was further explained in the corporate charter, the Mattachine Foundation was a nonprofit group focused on education (Social Semantics Division of the Mattachine Foundation, Inc. 1952). Moreover, the Foundation publicly distanced itself from any other organizations by stating, "The Foundation is entirely separate and distinct from any other organization with similar aims or purposes" (Mattachine Foundation, Inc. 1953).

Although there is certainly overlap between the Foundation and the Society, particularly in terms of the goal of education, there are three additional types of documents that show that these were two distinct groups. First, meeting minutes indicate that the organizations held separate meetings that dealt with different issues related to the overall work of what Harry Hay referred to as the Mattachine movement. Second, all documents that would be viewed by those outside Mattachine are

written by the Mattachine Foundation, Inc., while those that are meant for the members reference the Society. Third, in a letter written prior to the Constitutional Convention of 1953, one of the Society's founders clearly discusses the groups as different entities with different goals for the convention. These documents will be discussed in turn in the following text.

During 1952 and the start of 1953, both the Society and the Foundation were meeting regularly. In September 1952, for example, the Society met and discussed reports from local chapters, a book club, and various details of a conference (Mattachine Society 1952). Four days later, the Mattachine Foundation was discussing the process of establishing a bank account, a decision to make Mrs. Hay the President and Romayne Cox the Secretary, and a decision to take over as sponsors of the Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment (Mattachine Foundation, Inc. 1952b). What the meeting minutes of both groups show is that when members met as the Society, they were focusing on the tasks the organization would engage in with the broad membership. The Foundation, however, was focusing on administrative duties that would enable the "movement" to function.

Relatedly, the Foundation was the organization that had a public face. Pamphlets that were distributed publicly referenced the Mattachine Foundation, Inc., but never the Mattachine Society. Examples of pamphlets published by the Foundation included "An Open Letter to Friends of the Citizens' Committee to Outlaw Entrapment," "What to do in case of arrest," and "Victory," a pamphlet that publicized the positive outcome of the entrapment case (The Citizens' Committee to Outlaw Entrapment 1952). Internally, however, documents sent to the membership cited the Mattachine Society (e.g., The Fifth Order of the Mattachine Society 1953). In short, the Foundation was created as a public organization, one that could ostensibly interact with other groups and become involved in public matters. It handled most of the administrative work and enabled the founders to communicate with people outside the organization for the purposes of disseminating information. The Society, however, was engaged in the active work of mobilizing, though its existence was unknown to those outside the organization, and even some within.

On March 12, 1953, journalist Paul Coates published an article in the *Los Angeles MIRROR* citing questionnaires that the Mattachine Foundation had sent out to political candidates. While noting that the Foundation "might swing tremendous political power," he also pointed out that it had ties to Communists in the form of its attorney "Fred M. Snider, who as an unfriendly witness at the Un-American Activities Committee" (Coates 1953). Members of a discussion group in Long Beach sent the Foundation a letter seeking answers to the questions raised in Coates's article (Reiger 1953).

Even before the article was published in *The MIRROR*, members of the Long Beach discussion group had expressed concern about the secret structure of the organization (Rowland 1953a). Coates, however, accentuated the concerns over communism. As the decision to make the Mattachine Society an open, democratic organization was becoming imminent, the Society and the Foundation began to distinguish themselves further.

This led to a third document that further shows the contrast between the Society and Foundation. In a letter dated March 29, 1953 from Chuck Rowland, a Society founder, to Jerry Brissette, a San Francisco member, Rowland explains what the

founders planned to do at the convention when it came to both the Foundation and the Society. In particular, he wrote,

> At a Fifth Order meeting last night we made several decisions which I am passing on to you, although this is not public information and will not be made known to the local people until the Convention:
>
> (1) . . . We will oppose all ideas of a non-Communist statement by any group using the name Mattachine; we, as individuals, will have nothing to do with any group which has a loyalty oath as a condition of membership
>
> (2) At the Convention we will work for a Society which has close ties to the Foundation, but we will not compromise on the above to achieve this.
>
> (3) If it is impossible for the new Society to work with the Foundation, the Foundation will still go on, taking what new forms and employing what new directions the situation then prevailing demands.
>
> (4) There may be a split at the Convention. For example, one group may want to remain with the Foundation and another to dissociate itself from it in a new but altogether separate Society. If this occurs we will work with the new Society in whatever capacity we are able, but the Foundation will continue.
>
> (5) It is possible (although not likely in view of the prevailing situation) that a militant, new Society, without oaths or statements might arise at the Convention. If this happened, the Foundation might decide to dissolve altogether.
>
> (6) No matter what happens at the Convention, we are convinced that the Mattachine movement will live and grow. All our people, no matter what their different beliefs and methods, are convinced we need an organization, and all views will have the fullest chance for airing come the 11th of April. The present position of the Fifth Order is, therefore, "whatever your views—whatever you think of us or the Foundation or the Society—come to the Convention and help build the movement." (Rowland 1953b)

This letter from Rowland to Brissette shows that the two organizations, while already distinct, were developing separate purposes. First, the founders—the Fifth Order—seemed willing to relinquish control of the Society, though they would not allow any organization to use the name Mattachine if they explicitly incorporated a loyalty oath. Second, the letter shows that the founders planned to carry on the Foundation, with or without connection to the Society, and with their original ideals intact. However, if the members of the Society wanted to continue in the direction of the current organization, the Foundation would not be necessary. Because Rowland did not see such a "militant" scenario as likely, the Fifth Order laid out several ways in which they would continue to work with the Society, largely because they did see these two groups and their growing membership as representing a new movement.

One final note that is particularly interesting is the way that the Foundation changed from its inception to the time the letter was written. That is, although the Foundation was created largely as a front organization to enable the Society to function, it became a fallback for the founders. In other words, Hay, Rowland, and the others saw that the Society was going to move in a different direction, in particular because the dissenting faction was pushing for a loyalty oath and did not share the ideology of the Mattachine Society. While the Foundation may have begun as a front, it had the potential to become an independent organization that maintained the ideals of the original Society should the membership at large choose to dissociate with them completely.

At the Constitutional Convention, which took place over two weekends in April and May 1953, the Foundation and the Society did split. There was great debate over the continued use of the name Mattachine, though the Society did eventually decide to keep it, largely because it had gained legitimacy. The Fifth Order permitted the use of the name, as there were no anticommunist elements incorporated into the new Constitution, nor was a loyalty oath ever incorporated. The Foundation folded by the end of 1953, and although the first documents written for the new Mattachine Society at the convention did look like those of the original organization, an entirely new Constitution was drawn and a new organization was born by the end of the year.

To summarize, the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation were two separate organizations, each of which served a different function in early organizing and mobilizing. By clarifying the differences between the two in the preceding narrative, there are three main points that should be emphasized. First, the Foundation and the Society functioned simultaneously, though behind the scenes they served different purposes, as shown in the contemporaneous meeting minutes. Second, the Foundation may have been a front at first, but it did allow the "movement" (or perhaps what could be considered the loosely coupled system of the Society, the Foundation, and the Citizens' Committee to Outlaw Entrapment) to collect money and publicize their work, as shown in the different audiences for whom documents were written. Finally, the letter from Chuck Rowland shows that as the convention approached, the founders used the Foundation to ensure that they would be able to continue to work even if the dissenting faction took control of the Society. Moreover, although the Foundation was initially the more "conservative" organization, when the founders felt they might lose the Society, the Foundation became more radical.

Discussion

The preceding narrative offers three main findings about the relationships between the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation that help elucidate the strategy of covert organizing and the benefit of utilizing a loosely coupled system. These findings will be linked to the components of a loosely coupled system to show how the structure worked strategically and was an ongoing process.

First, the archives show that the Society and the Foundation, as the elements of this loosely coupled system, served separate, but related functions. Second, the

Foundation was set up to enable the Society to function by (1) handling the administrative tasks—including fundraising and disseminating material to the public—and (2) keeping the Society secret, thus protecting its members. This shows that the relation between the two was strong at the Foundation's conception. The leaders of both organizations were the same and the connection direct. To note, the Foundation publicly claimed to be an organization that studied "the question of sexual deviance and their relation to American society as a whole." The internal documents show, however, that this was not the type of work the Foundation was doing. Instead it was directly helping the Society do work it could not do otherwise, just as GLFs engage in political work that, if corporations did on their own, would undermine their goals (Walker 2009).

Additionally, the meeting minutes from both organizations provide evidence of the mechanisms that enabled to the Society, and the system as a whole, to function. In particular, these practices include holding separate meetings, dividing up tasks, and communicating to different audiences. These are the formal arrangements that allowed the Society, specifically, to function (Beekun and Glick 2001: 232–33).

Third, the Foundation could be separated from the Society so the founders could continue with their original agenda once the broad membership sought to change it. This was, again, not the Foundation's original purpose. Because it was already set up and only included founding members, however, they could divert their activities, sever ties with the Society, and continue to function. This finding emphasizes the ways units can either adapt or disband without harming either organization (Thompson 1967).

Given these findings, Mattachine offers evidence for the conditions under which this type of loosely coupled system enables organizations to work covertly, while continuing engage with different audiences and adapt as conditions change. First, the use of a "front" organization is desirable when the parent organization is prevented from engaging in certain work on its own because of specific external contingencies. In other words, this case shows how an organizational form is (1) a response to the environment (Clemens 1993) and (2) enables the group to avoid detection (Orton and Weick 1990). Second, it is also desirable when the organization wants to engage in active audience management (Hsu and Hannan 2005). In particular, this type of audience management can serve an offensive function, when the organization wants to control what is going on, or defensive, when the organization is simply trying to function and ensure its survival. Each of these points will be discussed in turn.

It has previously been established that an organization's form is often a reflection of its environment and the field in which it is embedded (Barnet and Carol 1995; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In the case of the Mattachine Society, the cell-like structure was a reflection of the sociopolitical environment during the Second Red Scare. The Mattachine Society was original created with three primary goals: to unify, educate, and lead. This involved bringing homosexuals together and providing leadership to this "cultural minority" at a time when being a known homosexual could get an individual fired from their job or thrown in jail. The work that the Mattachine Society was engaging in was thus done covertly. Members could not publicize their activities or they would put themselves at risk. Moreover, the founders selected a structure, similar to that of the eighteenth-century Freemasons, that

ensured a high level of secrecy. Even those within the organization did not know the identities of its leaders.

Organization members did, however, need to publicize some of their work to continue to mobilize and gain support of a broader audience. Thus, it is not just that the organizational form is a response to the environment which required them to work covertly, it specifically enables the group to engage in some work publically. In such a case, a loosely coupled system, and the creation of a front organization would be necessary. As Beekun and Glick (2001) note, there have been many definitions of loose coupling. It is the explicit focus on relations between and within organizations, however, that increases the utility of the concept. Thus, this article argues that both the use of a front organization and the relations between two separate organizations can similarly be conceptualized as loosely coupled. This is particularly the case when a parent organization seeks to engage in some work covertly.

Seeing both of these scenarios as analogous also enables us to understand the way in which the shifting focus of the Mattachine Foundation allowed it to function strategically given the threats in the field and within the organization. In particular, I argue that the Mattachine Foundation was initially created as a front, as several narratives suggest, as this was an organizational form that enabled the Society to function in a hostile environment. Because it was distinct from the Society, however, it also allowed the founders to continue working once conflict built up internally.

In his examination of international front organizations used by the Communist Party, Morris (1956) notes that front organizations were largely used for propaganda mean to attract "non-Communist sympathizers '... through a series of organizations loosely connected with the party by common aims, but free from the same commitments to revolutionary action and from the same stringent requirements of doctrine and discipline'" (Carr 1985: 404). This is not unlike the early aims of the Mattachine Foundation. Moreover, it resembles loosely coupled organizational structures in that there were two specialized, independent units with separate aims (Thompson 1967). In sum, both the secret, cell-like structure of the Society and the creation of the Foundation were a direct response to the sociopolitical climate of the early 1950s.

Equally important, however, the creation of the Foundation enabled the Society to continue its work unabated and without detection. The point to highlight here is that the Foundation engaged in the work that the Society could not, much like parachurches (Starks 2009) and SPEs (Dharan 2002) do for parent organizations.

By creating a separate organization that handled different tasks, the founders of the Mattachine Society were able to segment their audiences and align themselves with the interests of different groups. This was not just the case in terms of managing external audiences, however. It enabled them to deal with internal threats as well. Specifically, once a dissenting faction became a threat to the Mattachine Society, the founders sought to repurpose the Mattachine Foundation, in a sense. That is, although initially set up to work publicly, the founders shifted the focus of the Foundation, making it their own separate organization. The letter from Rowland to Brissette, he indicated that,

> (3) If it is impossible for the new Society to work with the Foundation, the Foundation will still go on, taking what new forms and employing what new directions the situation then prevailing demands. (Rowland 1953b)

What the preceding shows is that the founders had a sense that they were going to lose the Society to the dissenting faction, who would create "a new but altogether separate Society" (ibid). The Foundation then became the organization of the founders and was not going to be the public face of the Society any longer. Instead, it was going to be an independent entity that would allow the founders to continue engaging in the type of work they had been doing with the Society, but without the threat of a faction seeking to overthrow them.

In sum, adopting a loosely coupled system is an organizational strategy that enables a group to engage in work covertly. It allows leaders to segment their audiences, protecting themselves from threats outside and inside the organization. By identifying the elements of Mattachine that comprised the system, the quality and strength of the relations between those elements, and the arrangements that enabled the organizations to function, this article explained how the organizations reflect a loosely coupled system. Moreover, by drawing connections between Mattachine and three other types of organizations—parachurches, SPEs, and GLFs—it provides the opportunity to understand the process of organizing in the context of threat, even broadly defined.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the process of organizing covertly. It highlights the way in which the use of a loosely coupled system not only buffers organizational members from threatening external conditions but also allows organizations to adapt over time particularly in response to threats from within. Thompson (1967) emphasized the way that a loosely coupled system allows organizations to utilize specialized units with distinct aims. Additionally, he argued that when one unit is not functioning successfully, it can disband without threatening the organization. What the case of Mattachine shows, however, is that organizations adopting a loosely coupled structure also protects organizational leaders from threats from within. That is, when conflict creates factions within the organization, the units can split and both can survive independently. It is worth noting that the continued history shows that the Mattachine Foundation did fold. The loosely coupled structure that was adopted, however, left open the possibility that the original founders could have continued their work with the Foundation.

While the case of the Mattachine Society is in many ways unique, it is analogous to several other types of organizations that have been examined in both the organizational and movement literature. Although not previously described as such, this article argues that many organizations utilize structures similar to a front group to engage in work covertly, skirting government regulations or otherwise managing a sociopolitical climate that is unfriendly to the organizing groups. By highlighting the characteristics that these groups have in common, this article used the Mattachine Society to show how the use of an organizational structure—and loose coupling in

particular—is a tactic that enables groups to function despite conditions that would otherwise render such work difficult or illegal.

By illustrating this case study, I am to make two contributions to the organizational literature. First, following Beekun and Glick's (2001: 229) claim that "any development of loose coupling should capitalize on its focus on relations," I emphasize what these relations look like in practice. That is, building off of existing cases in the literature, I use a detailed case example—Mattachine—to show how these relations function, particularly as they enable covert political action. Second, I show how organizing in such a fashion is a process. While much of the organizational research resembles a snapshot of an organization at a given time, for example, how parachurches develop (Scheitle et al. 2017) or how SPEs engage in structural financing (Dharan 2002), this article shows how loose coupling enables flexibility over time. This allows for a more complex understanding of the benefits that a loosely coupled system provides. Further work in this area, perhaps more explicitly emphasizing the commonalities between different organizational forms, would likely prove fruitful.

Additionally, this article contributes to the social movement literature and our understanding of Mattachine as a case. First, much of our understanding of covert political conflict emphasizes conflict within organizations. While that was part of the story told here, it also provides an opportunity to understand how a social movement organization can mobilize and reach out to audiences when conditions external to the organization require secrecy. Finally, this article emphasizes the differences between the Mattachine Society and the Mattachine Foundation, clarifying the existing narratives of one of the first homosexual organizations in the United States.

Given the nature of covert organizing—that is, a desire or need to conceal one's work—it is important to recognize the limitations of the current case. In particular, compared the other types of organizations reviewed here, I provided only a single case example. The goal, however, was to show that what we know about other organizations was applicable, and the current case enabled a more complex understanding of the processes of organizing. Parachurches, for example, do not hide what they do; they enable individuals to segment their work so that they can engage in political work, but not under the guise of a nonprofit church. Similarly, Walker (2009) has shown that more and more corporations utilize GLFs. These corporations may not want their work to be public, but it is possible to examine the GLFs. Finally, those in the field of management and business more broadly have studied SPEs and shell corporations in great depth. For example, the case of Enron specifically has been studied in detail. Front organizations, like those used by the Communist Party, have not received the same amount of attention. Thus, while I argue the case of Mattachine is generalizable in that it provides evidence of the way in which a challenging group can engage in work covertly, it would be beneficial to identify other similar cases. Of course, the idea behind a front group is that it enables a parent organization to function without detection, thus identifying other cases is not easy. Future research would benefit from investigating different types of covert organizing (e.g., covert connections between organizations or covert mobilizing) to expand on the benefits of a loosely coupled system and the ways it enables different types of covert work.

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