

Secret Societies: Intimations of Organization

Introduction

‘Langdon was feeling anything but fortunate, and co-incidence was a concept he did not entirely trust. As someone who had spent his life exploring the hidden interconnectivity of disparate emblems and ideologies, Langdon viewed the world as a web of profoundly intertwined histories and events. *The connections may be invisible*, he often preached to his symbology classes at Harvard, *but they are always there, buried just beneath the surface.*’ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*.

It is often enough said that the contemporary world is dominated by formal organizations¹. It should not surprise us then that ours is also an age of organizational conspiracies, such as Dan Brown’s extraordinarily popular account of a secret society which concealed the fact that Jesus Christ had children. There is plenty of writing on conspiracies, but the specifically *organizational* aspect of this feature of contemporary culture is less often remarked.

In general, it is easy to assume that organizations are the causes of many of the things that happen in our world. We see a building with a neon sign on the top, a doorway with a brass plate, a van with a logo on the side. A letter on headed paper arrives, someone in an uniform does something that a voice on a telephone said that they would do, or we buy a product in a box that tells us who manufactured it and gives an address in Texas or Hong Kong. These organizations tell us that they exist, indeed they often insist that they exist, using the full spectrum of the marketing mix to ensure that we cannot miss them. But paralleling this hyper-visibility is another set of organizations; ones that we believe exist, but know little about. National and international criminal networks; associations of the wealthy and powerful who meet in hotels once a year; fraternities that own properties in cities across the world; religious sects and cults, and shadowy organizations which are historically documented, but whose aims and purpose are unclear. We might add to this list the national and international security apparatus of the state, because they are almost always entangled in such landscapes as well.

In their very helpful review of ‘organizational secrecy’ Costas and Grey suggest that it involves topics which ‘lurk marginally in the shadows of organization studies, almost as secrets in themselves’ (2014: 19). They insist that the ‘informational’ approach to secrecy needs to be augmented with an understanding of secrecy as a social process. I agree, and here want to build on Costas and Grey’s paper by extending its analysis into an area which they deliberately exclude, concentrating as they do on ‘secrets within non-secret organizations’ (*op cit*: 2). So this is not a paper about secrecy in conventional organizations, though it has theoretical implications for that domain, and neither is it about non-secret organizations that have as their business the acquiring of information by nefarious means – spy agencies, industrial espionage and the like (Grey 2012). Rather, this paper will be concentrating on the ‘secret society’ – a term which I am going to treat as synonymous with ‘secret organization’ - because I think that this category of institutions helps us think about some general properties of organizing. My argument in this paper is that organizations like the Masons, Opus Dei, and the Skull and Bones are important for organization studies because of the light that they throw on the formal organizations

that constitute the world around us. It seems to me that unusual forms of organizing – angelic choirs, circuses, outlaws – as well as the Order of the Peacock Angel, the Holy Vehm, and the Decided Ones of Jupiter the Thunderer (Daraul 1965) can be used to help us see conventional forms of organization in novel ways (Parker 2009, 2011, 2012), which is what this paper seeks to do.

The theoretical concern that motivates this paper is fairly simple. How do we know that something is an organization? Stohl and Stohl ask the same question of a ‘clandestine’ organization, in their case al Qaeda. As they suggest, despite the endless incantations of its name, ‘the communicative and material constitution of al Qaeda, *the organization*, remains an enigma.’ (2011: 1201, emphasis in original). This presents them with some interesting ontological problems, particularly since they are convinced that organizations are produced as systems of communication. Stohl and Stohl quite rightly conclude that there is almost always an assumption about trying to make things visible in organizational research, whether the data are numbers, texts or conversations. The evidence we use is usually of the empirical kind, the equivalent of looking for the neon sign. But none of these things are the organization. We can never see the organization, but only catch fragmentary signs of its presence. Even when we visit a building that ‘contains’ an organization, we don’t see ‘it’ but an intense display of the materials and events that signify it. By definition, the successfully secret society would leave no such evidence so that means that all the organizations I will be mentioning in this paper have accidentally or deliberately failed in their attempts to be invisible. They have left traces of their existence and we, like Dan Brown’s suspicious detective who does not believe in coincidence, then look for connections buried below the surface.

In this paper I will use the secret society to pose questions about the epistemology and ontology of organizing. I think that much organization studies has tended to assume that organizations are visible and transparent (Erickson 1979: 122), but in this paper I will instead agree with those who suggest that much about organizing is actually invisible or opaque. In that sense, ideas from hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, and studies of culture, resistance and informal organization all suggest that the organization is a haunted house, not a brightly lit machine. I will begin with a consideration of the characteristics of historical and contemporary organizational conspiracies, and then move on to elaborate what sort of ‘facts’ need to be claimed about a secret society to bring it into existence. After a section on the politics of contemporary organizational conspiracies, the paper concludes with some speculations on what the example of the secret society can tell us about the epistemological strategies pursued by organizational researchers, and the radical doubt that they might need to cultivate. In conclusion, I suggest that all organizations share many characteristics with secret societies, and that understanding invisibility and opacity should make organizational studies rather more paranoid.

Conspiracy Theory and Organization

Karl Popper, in his 1945 *The Open Society and its Enemies*, was scathing about what he called ‘the conspiracy theory of society’, and located it as a mistaken attempt to personalise the impersonal forces and co-incidences that structure our lives.

‘The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we

suffer from – such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.’ (Popper 2002: 352-3)

Like Richard Hofstadter’s condemnation of the ‘paranoid style’ of politics (1966), and Carl Sagan’s diagnosis of a ‘demon haunted world’, in which ‘significance junkies’ obsessively search for evidence of wrongdoing (1996), it is common for post-war intellectuals to dismiss contemporary conspiracy theories as a form of paranoia (Ronson 2001). That being said, plots and schemes are as old as recorded history, with disguises, assassinations and coups being regular features of the ancient world. So too are ideas about heretical sects, subversives, and religious or ethnic groups organizing against the public or hiding secrets from the masses (Cohn 1970). However, it is not until the early modern world that the idea of enduring formal organizations which hide their existence became a common part of culture. It is noteworthy that this is at the same time that the first corporate charters are beginning to be granted by the state. There are echoes of this in the Sociedad Anónima, Société Anonyme, Società Anonima and many other variants in North Western Europe - ‘societies of the nameless’ with purposes which transcend individuals. So when Adam Smith suggests in 1776 that when tradesmen meet ‘the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public’, he is telling us something rather important about the relationship between secrets and organizing. Perhaps it is no accident that the ‘Unlawful Societies Act’ was passed in the UK twenty three years later, a statute that outlawed any groups that swore oaths of secrecy, with the exception of the Freemasons. It was not repealed until 1967.

The ubiquity of formal organizations in contemporary conspiracy theory is evident, and has occasionally been remarked on by commentators (Parker 2001). However, it tends to be used as an epiphenomenon of a general tendency, such as the way that the target of conspiracies has become ‘evil elites’ and not scapegoated ‘evil others’ (Campion-Vincent 2003, 2004). It is widely agreed that the dominant optic of conspiracy has shifted from being focussed downwards - elites worrying about the masses – or laterally - the masses gathering against some particular minority – and is now focussed upwards. It is the common people who are now trying to identify conspiracies within the elite, a phenomenon which both Peter Knight and Mark Fenster suggest reflects a wider crisis of the legitimacy of authority (2000, 2008). This is not to say that attempts by the powerful to identify ‘the enemy within’ or outbreaks of popular aggression against strangers have ended, but that many people now have an *X Files* attitude to explanations provided by the powerful – ‘trust no one’. Investigative journalists such as those found on www.projectcensored.org and hardline conspiracists who assume that the world is a tissue of secrets and lies (Ronson 2001; Millegan 2004; Southwell 2005) share this hermeneutic of suspicion. I find these accounts of shifts in conspiracy logic pretty convincing, but my concern here is more specific, in the sense that I want to look in more detail at the secret organizations themselves, at the engines of conspiracy.

Georg Simmel wrote a typically dense essay on secrecy in the early 1900s, and a central concern for him was the ‘secret society’ as an example of the general problem of the individual wanting to be both different and the same (1906). As a first move, Simmel wants to insist that pure transparency (knowledge) or opacity (ignorance) are not possible in social relations, and hence that the question is not whether secrecy exists, but how much and why. His use of the secret society as an example is important, because it takes the features of that particular organizational

form as an ideal type of more general social processes involving the marking of boundaries and the shaping of identities. As Simmel, Jung and others have noted (Costas and Grey 2014), secrecy has many charms. It is a marker of belonging, a statement about privilege and status, a claim to possession of a mystery.

‘To associate with other like-minded people in small, purposeful groups is for the great majority of men and women a source of profound psychological satisfaction. Exclusiveness will add to the pleasure of being several, but at one, and secrecy will intensify it almost to ecstasy.’ (Aldous Huxley, in Marx and Muschert 2009: 225)

If we accept that one of the general social processes going on here concerns *secretus*, in the sense of exclusion and separation, then a structural analysis would suggest that the opposite process is also likely to be invested with social significance too. Uncovering, revealing, exposing, are likely to matter in a context in which hiding has social value. And this is precisely what we see in contemporary representations of organizations. The plots of a huge number of films, TV shows, comic books and so on concern the role of organizations in conspiracies of different kinds, and very often the question of the ontology of the organization itself is at issue, as the protagonists attempt to discover its nature and scale. For example, the notion that there is some sort of power behind the scenes is played out quite literally in the film, *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011) based on Philip K Dick’s 1954 short story, ‘Adjustment Team’. Characters step through an unassuming door and behind the scenes of the world to see besuited employees arranging matters according to a specified plan. And if someone does discover this deep structure to the world, the organization will then distract them by making their bus late (in this film), or make them forget what they have seen (in the *Men in Black* films, and Dr Who’s suited enemy ‘The Silence’), or kill them (in countless films in which the hero has to run around a lot and can’t trust anyone).

In this world ‘plot’, and the ambiguity of the word is helpful here, is predicated on the exposure of connections, and much of the time those connections are institutionalised, named as a shadowy organization which must be exposed – ‘SPECTRE’ in James Bond, ‘Hydra’ in Marvel Comics, DC Comics ‘League of Assassins’ and so on. In cyberpunk fiction there is a continual reminder of what William Gibson has called ‘invisible lines up to hidden levels of influence’ (in Czarniawska 2011: 33), and this is echoed in popular writing on organized crime in which the distinction between evil organization and legitimate business organization dissolves. Mark Lombardi’s fantastically detailed drawings of the connections between the powerful and their companies inscribe a powerful vision of invisible order (Grayson et al 2006: 88). Accounts of secretive offshore shell companies which discreetly avoid tax and publicity through chains of holding companies are revealed in art and political economy (Cameron 2014, Shaxon 2011). Internet and telecommunications frauds are carried out by entities such as the Russian ‘Business Network’, which operates in different countries with different names (SBT Telecom Network, Nevcon Ltd, 76Service), the South American ‘Superzonda’, or the worldwide ‘ShadowCrew’ (Goodman 2011, Berinato 2011: 220). Add to this the business activities of Latin American Cartels, Mafia groups, Russian and Balkan Mafiyas, English ‘firms’ or ‘gangs’, Hell’s Angels, Asian Yakuza and Triads, Caribbean Yardies and Posses, Prison and Barrio gangs, street collectives such as Mara

Salvatrucha and you have a landscape of organizations with no office, no address, and which tend to leave few traces (Gilman et al 2011, Parker 2012).

This is a hall of mirrors, with corporate offices appearing normal from the street, but secret lifts taking you down to an underground lair; organizations working parasitically within others; large businesses having hidden interests in lots of other firms; and, of course, everyone is buying off the police and the politicians. Iain Banks, in one of his final novels, writes about 'The Concern' or 'l'Expédience', an organization which might itself be fragmented into cliques and hierarchies with different agendas, and perhaps opposed by 'a sort of anti-Concern, some equally worlds-spanning shadow organization opposed to everything we do' (2009: 187).

'We knew there were various levels and classes of executives within l'Expédience with, at the apparent pinnacle of this structure, the Central Council itself, composed of people who knew all there was to know about the Concern's provenance, extent, operational methods and aims – and some of us were of the opinion – always perverse, in mine – that there might be one central authority figure at the head of all this tiered knowledge and power, a kind of organizational autocrat to whom everybody else was obliged to defer. But for all we knew that final, single, near-godlike Emperor of the realities – if he or she did exist – was little better than a foot soldier in a still greater grouping of other Concerns and meta-Concerns....' (2009: 246)

It seems to me that the secret society, as a social form which Simmel saw as exemplifying general features of everyday personal interaction, should also be understood as one element in a widespread social imaginary in which secrecy and organization are inextricably intertwined. This is not a world of clearly bounded and legitimate organizations, but of crime, conspiracy, and paranoia. The intentions of organizations are unclear, who is 'inside' seems vague and shifting, and even their very existence is in question. So when Michael Bradley, in his *Secret Societies Handbook*, asserts that there are 6 million Freemasons, in 100 thousand lodges (2005: 52), it is difficult to know whether he is right, and how (given what he says about their secrecy) he would know. That the Freemasons exist seems clear enough, but the organization itself has consistently claimed that there is no overarching Grand Lodge since each local Lodge is sovereign. So where do his numbers come from, and why should we believe Bradley anyway, who appears from his website (www.michaelbradley.info) to believe that Jews are descended from Neanderthals and are more aggressive than Cro Magnons? The problem of evidence is clear enough, and this is to use the example of a formal and well documented organization in a building with its name on the front. If we ask similar questions about Opus Dei, the Templars, the Bilderberg Group, the Yakuza or the Trilateral Commission, then the epistemological problems multiply.

Structures of Secrecy

However, books like Bradley's do tell us something about just how the secret society is described. All these descriptions have interesting similarities, and collectively they tell us something about what needs to be said to suggest that an organization exists at all. Take a contemporary example. According to a retired US intelligence officer, al Qaeda² possesses 'a standing army; it has a treasury and a consistent source of revenue; it has a permanent civil service; it has an intelligence

collection and analysis cadre; it even runs a rudimentary welfare program for its fighters, and their relatives and associates. It has a recognizable hierarchy of officials; it makes alliances with other states; it promulgates laws, which it enforces ruthlessly; it declares wars.' (Bobbitt 2002: 820) Whether this is true will be as hard to establish as the worldwide number of Masons, but as Stohl and Stohl (2011) and Schoeneborn and Scherer (2012) show, the fact that it was asserted consistently for ten years made it true. The organization was talked into solid existence through a kind of mimicry, an insistence that despite the lack of clarity about people, places, money, routines and so on, that it does exist. So what needs to be said in order to make an organization real?

The evidence in this section comes from a whole series of texts, some popular and some academic, which concern secret societies. What interests me here is not whether these are 'true' or 'false' accounts in themselves, but rather what they tell us about how such truths might be established. So, to begin, a common feature of any secret society is the idea that it has existed for some time. The Italian Carbonari claimed descent from the cult of Mithra, the Gnostics and the Templars (Daraul 1965: 90; Harding 2005: 46). The Freemason's origins are said to be found at the time of the building of the Temple of Solomon, or in ancient Egypt with the construction of the pyramids. Various documents have been found claiming to be descriptions of the Rosicrucians from the early 17th century onwards (Daraul 1965: 170; Bradley 2005: 122, Harding 2005: 120), even though concrete evidence about the existence of an actual secret society appears to post-date them. Claiming duration is thus a way of claiming solidity, so the publication of the *Fama Fraternitas of the Meritorious Order of the Rosy Cross* in 1614 provides a warrant for the existence of the organization. Or, as another example, the London coroner William Wynn Westcott was said to have received a document from a fellow Mason, who had himself found it in a book shop. The document described five Masonic rituals in coded fragments, and an attached letter suggested that more could be discovered by contacting *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris* at the *Licht, Leibe und Leben* branch of the German Rosicrucians. This was the origin story of the Isis-Urania Temple of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded in 1888 at 17 Fitzroy Street, London (Bradley 2005: 58).

If duration is one criteria, then another is the idea that entrance to the organization must be marked by ritual. This seems fairly universal, and most societies seem to have some sort of purification and promise at their heart. Ancient Phrygian accounts of Mithraic cults required drinking wine from a cymbal and bread from a drum (Daraul 1965: 68), just as early industrial craft associations employed complex initiations involving wine, a crucifix, torches, a table cloth, special roles and costumes, questions and answers and so on (Hobsbawm 1965: 150 *passim*). The Triads are said to have a six or seven hour ritual involving a 'mountain of knives', a fruit seller and a sacrificed cockerel, among other things (Booth 1991: 36). Part of the Entered Apprentice oath for Freemasons is –

'I most solemnly and sincerely promise and swear, that I will always hail, ever conceal, and never reveal, any of the arts, parts or points of the hidden mysteries of ancient Freemasonry (...) under no less a penalty than that of having my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by its roots, and buried in the rough sand of the sea at low water mark...' (Bradley 2005: 55)

Second degree Masons risk having their hearts ripped out, whilst third degree Masons will have their bowels burned to cinders (Streeter 2008: 76). The oaths and speeches are often constructed in a self-consciously ancient or legal language, such as the Ku Klux Klan's 'solemnly pledge, promise and swear' and the Triads 'Thirty Six Oaths' (Bradley 2005: 77, Booth 1991: 193). Perhaps in an echo of the requirement for duration, the language needs to sound as if it has been echoing down the centuries too.

The internal structure and role of the organization is often remarkably detailed, in an almost parodic echo of formal organizations. According to the *Dossier Secrets d'Henri Lobineau* the Priory of Zion comprised of 1093 members, each in seven grades of membership, with the numbers in each grade determined by multiples of three (Cox 2004: 50). The Templars had knights, sergeants, chaplains and servants, a model adopted from the Cistercians and later adopted by the Freemasons (Bradley 2005: 71). There are seven different Operating Thetan levels for the Scientologists. The Bavarian Illuminati had three levels of initiation – the Nursery, containing the degrees of Novice, Minerval and Illuminatus Minor; the Masonic, containing Illuminatus Major and Illuminatus Dirigens; and the Mysteries, containing Lesser and Greater Mysteries. Each of the latter were also divided into two – the Presbyter and Prince, and Magus and Rex (Streeter 2008: 103). The structure of the Golden Dawn consisted of ten or eleven degrees of membership depending on which account is to be trusted (Bradley 2005: 59, Streeter 2008: 136). They were based on the degrees of the Sephiroth from the Kabbala, and were divided into three orders, which moved members from the Neophyte to the Ipsissimus.

This is not merely an enumeration of names, but also a description of hierarchy with initiation rituals to enter a higher level. In a marvellous echo of Weber, the highest level of the KKK was a Grand Wizard ruling an Invisible Empire, then a Grand Dragon ruling a Realm, a Grand Titan over a Dominion, Grand Giant a Province, and finally Grand Cyclops managing a Den (Harding 2005: 100). Forms of naming might also reflect a division of labour. The Garduna, Holy Warriors of Spain, divided their members into *chivatos* (initiates), *floreadores* (fighters), *ponteadores* (swordsmen), *capataz* (bosses), and the *Hermano Mayor* (grand master). Women were known as *cobertas* (covers), *serenas* (sirens) and *fuelles* (bellows) depending on what part they played in ambushes or assassinations (Daraul 1965: 99; Harding 2005: 65). Divisions of labour are also divisions of knowledge. For the Assassins (*hashshasin*) of 12th century Syria, at each level of initiation they were told that what they had learnt at the lower level was false (Streeter 2008: 242). They also operated a cellular arrangement (Bradley 2005: 14) in order to ensure that few or no people had a full picture of the organization. The secrecy of any society also appears to become even more intense as we move to higher levels, with vague accounts of the three Ordines who are at the top of the Illuminati (Harding 2005: 111) and 'Secret Chiefs' or 'Tibetan Masters' – 'cosmic moral guardians' who run the world and perhaps the universe (Streeter 2008: 137).

Within the genre of secret societies the descriptions of everyday activity are notable by their absence. There are no accounts of routines and rules, of the dull nine-to-five, but many descriptions of the extraordinary, the taboo. So we have accounts of the ecstatic dancing and flagellation of the Skoptsi ('Castrated') of Russia (Daraul 1965: 79); the repeated initiations of the Cult of Mithra (Harding 2005: 54 *passim*);

the triple incisions of the Odin Brotherhood; the cannibalism of the West African 'Leopard Men'; and the mortification of the flesh using a whip or cilice for members of Opus Dei (Allen 2005). Uniforms might also be important during rituals such as the white hoods of the KKK or the aprons of the Masons, and there are also accounts of places which are particularly associated with the society, such as 'The Tomb', the home of the Skull and Bones society at Yale University, or the campground at Bohemian Grove in California (Millegan 2004).

However, by their very nature, material evidence of secret societies is scarce. The revelation of locations, membership, dress and so on is prevented by ensuring that information is only shared by others within the organization, by means of password routines, secret handshakes, and codes. So, the Bavarian Illuminati of the late 18th century adopted classical Roman and Greek names, and codenames for their headquarters. Messages were written in codes, the months were renamed, and dates of years were changed to the Parsee calendar (Streeter 2008: 103). The Triads are said to communicate by the 'manner in which a cigarette is taken from a packet; the way in which a tea-cup or chopsticks are held; the way money is offered in payment; the manner of holding a pen...' (Booth 1991: 38). The organization will only be visible to those who already know the codes. Levitt and Dubner illustrate this nicely with the story of Stetson Kennedy helping to break the KKK by leaking passwords, names and plans to radio shows 'making precious knowledge into ammunition for mockery' (Levitt and Dubner 2006: 50-9). For example, when the show *Adventures of Superman*, broadcast a description of the KKK as a secret society with the password routine 'Do you know Mr Ayak' and 'Yes, and I also know Mr Akai'³, then the actual passwords rapidly became worth nothing. A similar example is the publication of Scientology materials on the internet, such as the account of how the thetans were removed from their home planet and sent to Teegeeeack (which is Earth), and how the 'body thetans' cause humans problems to this day (Streeter 2008: 202 passim). Members had to pay for these materials in order to become one of the elect, hence having them freely available means that it was harder to sell what L Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology) called the 'mystery sandwich'.

This rushed summary of the characteristics of many different secret societies tells us what sort of evidence appears to be required in order to specify something as an organization. Because of their clandestine nature, as Stohl and Stohl point out, the organization leaves less sign of its presence (2011). What the popular literature on secret societies shows us is what sort of phenomena we assume to be traces of organization – temporal duration, a barrier between inside and outside, internal structure and a division of labour, roles, rules, materials, rituals, codes and so on. Not all of these are necessary, because the existence of organization can be imputed on the basis of just a few, but at least some of them are needed for the account to be persuasive. In many ways 'the secret society becomes a structural image of the very world to which it has placed itself in contrast and opposition' (Hazelrigg 1969: 325, see also Erickson 1981). That is to say, the secret society seems to have the same sort of features as the non-secret organization, which suggests that the reverse might be true as well. Do what seem to be clearly visible forms of organizing share features with the secret society? However, before exploring the epistemological and ontological issues that this question raises, I first want to consider the politics of organized secrecy. The sort of judgements that are made about secret societies are

rather similar to the social science which is practiced within organization studies, and it is important to see this clearly before we proceed.

Conspiracy Politics

In theory, a secret society could exist to either protect or subvert the dominant order. In the German *Bundesroman* of the 19th century, beginning with Schiller's 'Ghost-Seer' (1787-9), we have many accounts of heroes uncovering plots by both evil Jesuits bent on world domination, or lofty nobles preserving humanist values in a corrupt world (Ziolkowski 2013). Political judgements about the activities of any given society can only be made within a particular context, and with reference to some evaluation of the merits of existing social arrangements. So, for example, the Freemasons were persecuted for being a Jewish organization by Italian, German and Spanish Fascists; and as a Zionist organization in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. They are seen as a capitalist organization in communist countries; as devil worshippers for some Christian groups; and as an 'old boys network' for many people who have concerns about nepotism (Streeter 2008: 80-2). Yet there is also a suggestion that progressive ideas were being disseminated by Freemasons in France prior to the revolution, as well as evidence that Freemasonry was a mechanism for the organization of resistance to Spanish imperialism in South America in the early 19th century (Streeter 2008: 91-94). The same organization appears to mean different things, unless we decide that it isn't the same organization.

We can find evidence of secret societies that have supported revolutionary causes – the Cerce Social and Conjuraton des Égaux during the French revolution. The 1799 'Unlawful Societies Act' was intended to ban supposedly seditious groups such as the London Corresponding Society, the United Britons as well as proto-trade unions such as the Tolpuddle Martyrs. It was followed by the Irish 'Unlawful Oaths Act' (1823) aimed at both Catholic and Protestant Societies. There are plenty of examples of groups supporting revolutions from the right - the Ordo Novi Templi, Thule Society and Higher Armanen Order in early 20th century Germany, and which influenced German fascists and private armies (Cantor 1970: 125 *passim*), or Opus Dei in Franco's Spain (Allen 2005: 56 *passim*). Claims concerning who organizes and for what purpose are always political. In the US in the 1950s the John Birch Society claimed that the Illuminati were the precursors of communism, and accused Marxists of merely propagating Illuminati propaganda in order to bring about the New World Order. In all of these cases, the clandestine organization can be understood as a relatively powerless minority who are aimed at destabilising the status quo. Secrecy can then be understood as –

'a tactic used by those who don't have the resources or numbers to accomplish their goals through the methods of ordinary politics (...) secrecy is an equaliser: it's one of the few tools that allow the little guy to contend with the power structures of society. What the ruling class doesn't know about is a lot harder for them to trample!' (Michael Greer, in Streeter 2005: 248).

Depending on who is looking, this might be understood as heroism or treason, but both share a sense that 'secret societies protect heretical ideas' (*op cit* 249, Cohn 1970). It follows then that the identification of the covert organization is a matter of locating members, documenting practices, finding meeting places and so on.

Yet the dominant form of contemporary conspiracy thinking makes the organization of secrecy into a much more diffuse matter since it involves powerful groups who are intent on keeping the world as it is, or want to change it to their advantage. The 'enemy within' are now the private and state organizations which govern us, and use ideology to persuade us that we are really free. As Marx and Muschert put it -

'What if Simmel made a visit to a contemporary supermarket and was greeted with his own image on a video monitor, heard advertising on a loudspeaker, provided a discount card to the checkout clerk, and received personalized (or at least "profilized" messages on the sales receipt promising future discounts?' (2009: 226)

The contemporary world is not what it seems. Organizations continually tell us that they are doing things for particular reasons (because they care about customers, employees, the environment) when we know that this is at best an evasion, at worst a lie. Our experience encourages paranoia, because the intensity of customer service, marketing, political communication and the spatial organization of supermarkets and airport gift shops can leave us in no doubt that we are the subjects of manipulation. For anyone to assume otherwise would be madness.

So the contemporary logic of the secret society can be understood as an intensification of ordinary experience, a form of popular critique embedded within popular culture (Campion-Vincent 2004: 111 *passim*, Fenster 2008). Consider Michael Bradley, writing about Yale University's 'Order of Skull and Bones' -

'Some would argue further that globalization, materialism and the permissive society is another way that the Bonesmen are successfully ushering in a New World Order by breaking down the family unit – the single biggest obstacle to totalitarian mind control – while being seen publicly to be struggling to protect it. The most visible and vocal protectors of morality are the very people who are working behind the scenes to destroy it.' (2005: 109)

At its heart, this is a suggestion that contemporary capitalism, of the sort practiced by the sort of people who join elite university societies, damages social relations. Of course, to say that the world is run by a few in the interests of a few is a criticism which could be voiced by the majority of contemporary social scientists too, whether their arguments concern equality, income, wealth, education, globalization or whatever. So a conspiracy theory, in this case a well-documented one, which involves Roberto Calvi, the P2 Masonic lodge, the Vatican's Banco Ambrosiano, the Mafia, the CIA and their 'Gladio' operation to counter communist influence is merely a specific example of some commonly understood general *organizational* processes.

My point is that organizational conspiracies are ordinary, and that contemporary conspiracy theory is about organizations. There are plenty of radicals who make connections between corporations, the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and so on. These are John Pilger's *New Rulers of the World* (2002), a group of interests hidden because as, Noam Chomsky suggests, democratic societies practice 'thought control' (1989) and practice Klein's 'shock doctrine' (2008). So when a conspiracist like Michael Streeter names the Council on Foreign Relations, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Trilateral Commission, and the Bilderberg Group (2008), he is identifying some credible agents with comprehensible motives.

'I now believe that Western history needs to be completely rewritten to tell the hidden story behind our true economic and political global hierarchy. The more I have researched, the more alarming my discoveries have been. (...) I

have woken up to the possibility that we are not free, that we do not control our destinies, and that we are the puppets, not the masters.’ (Bradley 2005: 9-10)

The metaphor of puppets is also one used in Peter Berger’s *Invitation to Sociology* too (1966: 199) in order to explain the importance of social forces, and consequently the importance of sociology. The idea that the world happens behind our backs is, in much social science, given names like ‘realism’, ‘functionalism’ and ‘structuralism’, all dignified words for the same sort of imputation. But as Jon Ronson shows nicely, in his book of adventures with David Icke, Islamic fundamentalists and the Klu Klux Klan, ‘their’ logic is pretty much the same as ‘ours’ (2001).

The shift from top-down to bottom-up versions of paranoia also seems to be a shift in the epistemological warrant required. The descriptions of older secret societies are catalogues of bounded organizations with distinctive structural and cultural features. That they engage in extraordinary practices is not the point, because they are identified as organizations in just the same way that any non-secret organization would be – rules, roles, entry criteria, duration and so on. However, if we look at contemporary conspiracy theory, the descriptions are less specific, but propose greater power and reach. The very ontology of powerful forces – structures, systems, networks - seems to exceed simple descriptions of single institutions, and become a field of enmeshed organizations, a dark net of secrecy, a web which captures everything. It is to this redefinition of organization that we now turn.

In Search of Organization

In 1564, Cosimo I de’ Medici, the ruler of Florence, commissioned a one kilometre long covered and enclosed corridor. The Vasari corridor stretches from the Uffizi to the Pitti Palace, and the small round windows in the corridor were called ‘Cosimo’s eyes’ from which the people of Florence could be spied upon. The founder of this banking dynasty, Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici, had as his motto ‘always keep out of the public eye’ (Hibbert, 1979). Contemporary power is no different, and the injunctions to invisibility are amplified when the business requires concealment.

The Mafia, for example, is an organization that attempts not to leave any traces, and that covers its tracks⁴. As the gangster Henry Hill remembered, ‘we paid cash for everything. This way, there were no records or credit card receipts’ (2004: 35). After the arrest of the Mafia Don Bernardo ‘Tractor’ Provenzano in 2006, many tiny scraps of paper - ‘pizzini’ - were discovered in his clothing which referred to his various business associates by number. He was number 1, and the numbering went up to 163. According to Longrigg and McMahon (2006), ‘the ghost of Corleone’ never used mobile phones, and ‘believed in keeping the organization out of sight, the better to do business’. The Mafia attempts to leave no footprints, no noises. Many members deny that the organization exists at all. Don Calò Vizzini, a Sicilian Mafiosi, was being interviewed by a newspaper journalist in the 1950s.

Don Calò: The fact is that every society needs a category of person whose task it is to sort out situations when they get complicated. Generally these people are representatives of the state. But in places where the state doesn’t exist, or is not strong enough, there are private individuals who...’

Interviewer: ‘Mafia?’

Don Calò: 'The Mafia? Does the Mafia really exist?'
(Dickie 2004: 253)

Let us take that at face value. Perhaps Don Calò was inadvertently asking an important ontological question about organizations in general. We imagine they exist, because they constantly tell us that they do, but what is an organization but a moving flux of people and things? This certainly seems to fit with contemporary ideas about the death of bureaucracy, and the growth of a network society. Indeed, from the 1980s onwards, much of the literature on Post-Fordism and the 'Third Italy' – the clusters of small firms which developed in the 1970s and 1980s in the central and northeast regions – stressed that the success of industrial districts was about semi-visible informality, not the gigantic apparatus of the contemporary corporation. The sort of words and phrases that attempted to capture this rotated around the idea of a network of family run firms, hence 'cohesion', 'inter-firm linkages', 'trust', 'co-operation' and so on. In this post-bureaucratic world, written contracts were rare, but senses of loyalty and inter-dependence with other organizations were high. Sterling notes that the Mafia also entered into partnership arrangements with the Camorra from Naples, the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, the Hell's Angels, various US based Latino gangs, the Chinese Triads, Caribbean gangs and so on (1991: 386). As Gilman et al's (2011) edited collection on criminal globalization demonstrates, these are networks that are durable and powerful, but that leave only suspicions and whispers.

This is a further example of what Stohl and Stohl call the 'fragmentary materiality' of clandestine organizations. We seek evidence of their existence, but in the knowledge that such evidence will be hard to find, and those traces that we do find might have been placed there by agencies who wish to distract us from discovering the truth. How we evaluate evidence then becomes crucial.

"'What an organization is' always depends on who is speaking *in its name, on its behalf, or for it.*' (Stohl and Stohl 2011: 1207)

One of the problems in claiming to know about secret societies is that we might doubt the evidence of their existence. This is the case of The High Priesthood of Thebes, or the Elders of Zion for example, which are both dismissed by authorities on the matter (Harding 2005: 81, Streeter 2008: 149). Yet Arkon Daraul's book contains a chapter on 'False Cults and Societies', but follows it with a chapter on The High Priesthood of Thebes claiming that the 1785 anonymous pamphlet is 'plausible' (1965: 115). There is plenty of evidence that secret societies are sometimes invented or elaborated upon in order to suggest that there is a conspiracy of some kind, such as Jews, or Muslims in the case of various recent conspiracies, such as the Islamic Australia Foundation, or even al Qaeda. Or the same thing might change its name continually – what we now call the Triads being variously termed 'The White Lotus Society', *Hupeh, Shansi*, 'The Cudgels', 'The Boxers', 'The Big Swords', 'the Red Fists' and so on since the late 18th century (Booth 1991; Harding 2005: 139). Or even what we think are separate organizations are actually entangled. The 18th degree of the Scottish Rite of Masonry is known as the Knight of the Rose Croix (Streeter 2008: 115). Surely this shows that the Rosicrucians and the Masons are working together?

In book one of *The Meditations*, Descartes considers the possibility that his perceptions of the world are being systematically distorted.

'I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; (...) I may at least do what is in my power and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be.'

Descartes' move here is intended to ensure that he is not being played for a fool by an agency with greater powers than his, and social scientists have been seduced by such Gnosticism ever since. The idea that the world we see is not all that there is, and that a demiurge seeks to mislead us, is common to any form of thought which seeks to understand hidden systems (Rossbach 1996). In the present age, such a caution is more apposite than ever. There are plenty of people who want us to believe things, and who have stealthy and viral technologies to nudge us in the directions that they intend. Anyone who believes that contemporary organizations are transparent hasn't been paying much attention.

In an odd misstep, or perhaps a joke, Simmel suggests early on in his essay that larger organizations are now more transparent than they were – 'able to act with complete integrity in marketing their goods' and that smaller business people will catch up with this modern way of doing business eventually.

'So soon as the methods of doing business among small traders, and those of the middle class, have reached a similar degree of perfection, the exaggerations and actual falsifications, in advertising and recommending goods, which are today in general not resented in those kinds of businesses, will fall under the same ethical condemnation which is now passed in the business circles just referred to.' (1906: 447).

Later in the essay, he suggests that the same is happening with the state, with individuals gaining privacy just as 'politics, administration, justice have lost their secrecy and inaccessibility' (*op cit*: 469). There is a sense in which he (like Mauss and Jung) regards secret societies as somehow prior to formal public organization, a simpler and more primal form of association⁵. Yet the overall argument in his essay suggests that secrecy is not something that can be replaced by transparency, as if it were possible to imagine relations between people in which all parties knew everything (Vattimo 1992). This means that there is a failure in his essay to apply the lessons of the secret society to organizing more generally, in part because Simmel assumes that authoritarian societies produced secret societies as an arena of freedom, whilst greater secrecy of association now becomes more attractive in more open societies (*op cit*: 483, Hazelrigg 1969). This progressive teleology prevents him applying his insights to modern organizing, even though there are plenty of suggestions in his essay that organizations themselves produce secrecy because people enjoy being in cabals, and because hierarchy is predicated on what we would now call 'information asymmetry'.

If we strip away his assumption that there is a move towards public transparency, we might use Simmel's specific theory to suggest that organization always produces both secrecy and transparency. Further – following hints in Birchall (2011), Horn (2011) and Costas and Grey (2014) – I want to suggest that this is related to the formal operations that produce entities that we recognise as organizations. *Secretus* begins

with separation, with a setting apart that marks different social spaces. Such boundaries are constitutive of organizing, and of organizations. The boundary, the seam that divides and joins (Cooper 1989), is one that might be marked by ritual and symbol, by descriptions of how what happens inside is different to what happens outside, because these are the traces that we look for when seeking evidence for the existence of an organization, such as a secret society. This would be a reasonable assumption to make for someone like Simmel, with his concern for the relationship between wholes and parts, collectives and individuals. However, in the present age, even if we do not find such evidence, it does not mean that organization is not present. Simmel can also be read now as a post-structuralist, always insisting that one category makes another, and that terms are in a dialectical relation (Cooper 2010). In this way it becomes possible to assert that the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' is an epistemological one too, a filter which prevents certain information from becoming visible. In that sense, there is a logical similarity between a contemporary anti-corporate position and the idea that secret elites are running the world. Both assume that Descartes' demiurge is capable of manipulating the traces of organizing, of making us see what 'they' want us to see. Secrecy and organization are structurally linked, but the contemporary dominance of organizations has made secrecy into an epistemological condition for all of us, not an occasional choice for some to wear robes and chant in darkened rooms.

Organization studies, whether seeking accounts of structures of formality or of processes of informality, tends to assume that what is being investigated is in principle amenable to investigation. Whether using science, phenomenology or hermeneutics, there is a narrow path to truth. However, if we see the world of organizations through the optic of the secret society, such an assumption becomes questionable because we are immediately in danger of being deceived, and there is no-one person or agency who we can trust to show us truth. This is not so much a diagnosis about method, but a description of what it means to live in an organized world. As the SF author William Gibson puts it, intelligence and security are the opposite of advertising and marketing (Gibson 2007: 208). There are two ways in which we might understand the implications of this. The first is a political assumption about epistemology, in the sense that contemporary conspiracy theory assumes that organizations – including the state – are agents involved in deception at all levels. At one level we can understand this in terms of ordinary matters such as marketing claims for products and services, corporate social responsibility statements, or explanations for high levels of pay. It is not a big leap to then suggest that corporations are conspiring with politicians, or that states engage in false flag and black propaganda operations. These are political matters, in the sense that they reflect judgements about distributions of power, and suggest a sceptical stance with regard to the accounts that organizations provide of themselves.

The second implication reflects an ontology which shapes an epistemology, in the sense that the secret society forces to think about what it means to claim that something is an organization. As we have seen, the traces of secret societies are faint and require decoding. Like Robert Langdon, we need to assume that the connections may be invisible, but they are always there, buried just beneath the surface. They involve histories and events told by unreliable witnesses which may, or may not, intimate the presence of something we can claim to be the cause, and then name. When we claim, as is often the case, that this or that organization did something, or

that the world is now dominated by organizations, it is easy to forget that we have never seen one. We see people, uniforms, organization charts, buildings with neon signs. It is easy enough to make the mistake of assuming that what is visible to us is an organization, rather than fragments, hints and suggestions. Because an organization is never visible, and much evidence of it is deliberately kept secret from us. Our social science often tells us to look for structures, and it often encourages scepticism, but it rarely encourages the sort of consistent paranoia which is associated with contemporary organizational conspiracy theories. Perhaps we need an epistemology which is less complacent, and more suspicious of the accounts provided by organizations. As Schoeneborn and Scherer (2012) suggest, al Qaeda is marked by some sort of relation between extreme visibility and extreme invisibility, and I think that this might be an assumption that is more generalizable than a terrorist cell. Because if we start from the idea that ours is a society of secrets, populated by secret societies which masquerade as formal organizations, then a paranoid epistemology is the only rational response.

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² At the time of writing, I am assuming here that this is an organization distinct from ISIS, ISIL, or 'The Islamic State', which emerged into public consciousness in 2014.

³ Standing for 'Are you a Klansman', and 'A Klansman am I'.

⁴ This section is an edited version of some parts of 'Tony Soprano on Management: Culture and Economy in Fact and Fiction' *Journal of Cultural Economy* (2009) 2/3: 379-392.

⁵ Mauss's writings in this area seem to have influenced Georges Bataille to found his secret society, 'Acephale', which allegedly met in the woods and read Nietzsche and de Sade.