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The European Origins of Transnational Organizing:  
The International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE)  
Leila J. Rupp

In 1951, at a congress convened in Amsterdam, representatives from Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland formed a new organization, the International Committee for Sexual Equality (ICSE), which linked existing homophile groups across national borders within Europe.<sup>1</sup> The new body sent a telegram to the United Nations demanding equal rights for homosexual minorities based on the principles of the UN, the “findings of modern psychological, biological and medical research,” and “mankind’s greater awareness of social injustice,” a clear reference to the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Picking up the work of transnational organizing around sexuality first launched by Magnus Hirschfeld’s World League for Sexual Reform in the 1920s, the ICSE carried the torch into the 1960s, when other groups kept the movement alive and then connected with the founding in 1978 of the International Gay (now International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex) Association (ILGA), the contemporary face of the global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement. Although the International Committee for Sexual Equality fostered a theoretically universal homophile identity, in fact the membership remained predominantly male and European. That Europe played such a formative role in the creation of transnational activism around same-sex sexuality helps us to understand the contemporary dominance of Europe in the ILGA. In addition, the history of the ICSE shows how homophile activists in the immediate postwar period were already fashioning an idea of Europe that moved beyond the divided continent of wartime.

In the context of the contemporary recognition that a Western conception of what it means to be gay or lesbian is both widely understood globally but in uneasy interaction with more local and national conceptions (Manalansan 1995; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999;

Boellstorff 2005, Blackwood and Wieringa 2007), I point here to three fundamental ways that transnational homophile activism in the 1950s was fundamentally European (Herzog 2009): 1) the centrality of European groups and the shift of the center of transnational activism around same-sex sexuality from Germany in the early 1900s to the Netherlands in the 1950s; 2) the fostering of a homosexual cosmopolitanism and sexually expressive culture; and 3) a sense of superiority of European modes of organizing. This history suggests the way that sexual identity and activism around sexuality is entangled with place, the way Europe shaped transnational activism in the 1950s and beyond, and the way that transnational organizing around sexual identity remains problematic, given the variety of ways that people across the global conceptualize what it means to have and act on same-sex desires.

### **The European Composition of the ICSE**

The ICSE traced its origins to Magnus Hirschfeld's Scientific Humanitarian Committee, founded in 1897. A Dutch version of the organization, the *Nederlandsch Wetenschappelijk Humanitair Komitee*, emerged in 1911 in response to a reform of the penal code that criminalized same-sex sexual relations with men under the age of twenty-one (sixteen was the age of consent for heterosexual relations). From 1911 to 1940, the Dutch group, with connections to its German parent until the Nazis came to power, published brochures, built a library, and distributed yearly reports to doctors, jurists, and students. The German occupation of the Netherlands spelled the end of the committee's existence, but at war's end, former members organized a new group, at first called the Shakespeare Club and later the *Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum* [Cultural and Recreational Center, known as the COC]. The COC, which had attracted some 3000 members by 1958, claimed status as the largest homosexual organization in the world in that decade.<sup>3</sup>

The decision to found a transnational organization emerged from the leadership of the COC (Warmerdam and Koenders 1987). The insistence on transcending national borders certainly had a great deal to do with the traditional internationalism of the Dutch and their admirable ability to speak multiple languages. As the vice-president of the ICSE put it in a 1957 interview, “it is commensurate with Dutch mentality to open the doors to all countries of the world.”<sup>4</sup> But the commitment to transnational action also represented a nod to the Hirschfeld legacy. In 1928, Hirschfeld had founded the World League for Sexual Reform, denoting the International Conference for Sexual Reform on the Basis of Sexual Science, held in 1921 in Berlin, as the first congress of the transnational group. The new body, which held congresses in Copenhagen in 1928, London in 1929, Vienna in 1930, and Brno in 1932, brought together activists and scholars on birth control, marriage reform, eugenics, free love, sex education, and homosexuality. Congresses planned for Moscow, Paris, and the United States never took place, and the organization, which functioned only as the sponsor of the congresses, folded in 1935 (Dose 2003). It perhaps seemed natural to convene a transnational gathering following in this tradition, although the ICSE differentiated itself from Hirschfeld’s group broader focus on sexuality since it “has its foundations in the circles of homosexuality and has been established by internal co-operation in their own ranks.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1951, the president and vice-president of the COC, Nico Engelschman and Henri Methorst, took the initiative of convening the first International Congress by contacting existing European homophile groups.<sup>6</sup> A document in the files of the ICSE described the organization as continuing the work of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee “in a form suitable for our period and generation and adapted to a new mentality which is growing in man today,” calling it “for us a UNO, a highest authority.”<sup>7</sup> Engelschman, in his speech at the first congress, emphasized the importance of transnational contact. “We want to know and understand the conditions under

which people [in other countries] work and love. We want, through international cooperation, to help like-minded friends in more difficult situations.” He mentioned wanting to let UNESCO “hear our voices” and learn about their needs, and he ended with the hope that the congress would strengthen organizations throughout Europe and lead to a “deepening of friendship and love from person to person and peoples to peoples.”<sup>8</sup> Italian count Bernardino del Boca de Villaregia, picking up on this theme, sent a message to the second congress expressing that “all our energy should be directed to the internationalisation of our work.”<sup>9</sup>

At the first gathering of the nascent group, Engelschman sought to explain the reasons why “after the termination of five calamitous years of war” they wanted to form a union with “so special a character.” Rather than seeing wartime hostility as an obstacle to transnational organizing, Engelschman insisted that the war “had awakened the burning desire in all peoples to bridge the borders of their own lands [and] to work together.”<sup>10</sup> This is especially remarkable given the emphasis on establishing connections across the war’s battle lines. Engelschman credited “a concentrated friendship” between the Netherlands and Germany for the launch of international activities, noting as well “a growing friendship between Germany and France.”<sup>11</sup> As one German man writing to the organization put it, since the two countries were wartime enemies, “we should not recognize this hate, we should forget what was, we should be friends across the German border.”<sup>12</sup> The German groups emphasized the fact that the Nazis sent homosexuals to concentration camps as a way of distancing themselves from wartime enmity and fostering solidarity on the basis of sexual identity. In the aftermath of the war the center of homosexual activism, on both the national and transnational level, moved from Germany to the Netherlands, but retained a sense of European unity.

The national homophile organizations that joined the ICSE had different origins and took various forms. The *Forbundet af 1948* [League of 1948], the name calling attention to the

importance of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, originally spanned Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Later Denmark and Norway separated but both kept the name *Forbundet*, and Sweden formed its own organization, the *Riksförbundet för Sexuellt Likaberättigande* [Swedish Union for Sexual Equality]. Two French groups belonged: *Le Verseau* [Aquarius], a small group, and, until it broke with the ICSE over control of the 1955 Paris congress, André Baudry's *Arcadie* [Arcadia], the subject of a magisterial study by Julian Jackson (2009). In Belgium, the *Centre de culture et de loisirs* [Cultural and Recreational Center] modeled itself, as the name suggests, on the Dutch COC. The group around *Der Kreis* [*The Circle*], the long-lived Swiss-based journal of male homosexual culture founded in 1932, played an active role (Kennedy 1999). The ICSE sought to unite a host of local German groups in Hamburg, Bremen, Frankfurt, and Berlin, although the leadership periodically threw up their collective hands about the unwillingness of local groups to merge into a national organization and the personal conflicts and scandals that spilled over into the international work.<sup>13</sup> The Homosexual Law Reform Society in Great Britain made contact with the International Committee but did not officially join, not wanting to be identified as an organization of homosexuals, although British individuals regularly attended the congresses.<sup>14</sup> The ICSE reached across the Atlantic to the United States, in 1953 welcoming to its ranks the two major homophile groups, the Mattachine Society, launched in Los Angeles in 1950, and ONE, Incorporated, the sponsor of an independent gay and lesbian magazine, also based in Los Angeles. The ICSE also made contact with the Daughters of Bilitis, the U.S. lesbian organization founded in 1955 in San Francisco.

Because the ICSE relied on affiliation from existing groups, it remained Eurocentric. Like other transnational organizations, its official languages were European (English, German, French), its conferences and meetings took place in Europe (Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Copenhagen, Paris, Brussels, Bremen), and its officers were European. This is not to suggest that national

differences among European countries never reared their heads. One challenge the group faced was the use of languages, in publications and correspondence as well as at the congresses. A newsletter appeared right after the founding congress, at first mainly in English with some German and French articles and a few in other languages. It came out somewhat irregularly in changing formats over the years, always challenged by a shortage of both staff and funds. The publication had a dual purpose: to present “our point-of-view to a wider public, including “men of science,” but also to keep contact with members in the months between congresses.<sup>15</sup> At a business meeting in 1954, members spoke passionately about the need to reach members who did not read English: “If the ICSE wants to accomplish something in the future, as we hope it will, it must be represented by a three—if not four-language paper with a high international level.”<sup>16</sup> The International Committee launched a German periodical, *ICSE Kurier*, and then a German-language press service, *ICSE-PRESS*, in the mid-1950s in response to “the special position of Germany (i.e., small independent groups, most without periodicals, and periodicals on a commercial basis without organizations).”<sup>17</sup>

Languages also came in to play at the congresses. At the 1955 Paris congress, stenciled German and English translations of the speeches given in French were made available, and only in 1958, at the Brussels congress, was simultaneous translation from and to English, French, and German provided. While some members apologized for their imperfect use of second or third languages—Holger Bramlev from Copenhagen asked forgiveness, in German, that “my German is certainly very bad”—others complained about the imperfections of others’ linguistic abilities (“it was difficult enough to hear a translation into English which didn’t always make sense,” wrote a U.S. member).<sup>18</sup> Danish member Ewald Bohm found it “really amusing, how much confusion can arise from such a small international conference, where everyone seemingly understands the others, but only seemingly.” He then went on to point out that the term

*Unfähigkeit* used to describe a member not fulfilling his duties was also used in the literature to describe sexual impotence, “so that this *Unfähigkeit* of a member comes across as a bit involuntarily comical.”<sup>19</sup> Such misunderstandings and miscommunications, whether amusing or serious, plague all transnational efforts, and the International Committee, despite Dutch linguistic abilities, was no exception.

National differences also troubled the organization, and not only because the different countries had a range of laws regulating homosexuality. The most liberal laws, in the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries,<sup>20</sup> criminalized same-sex relations only if an adult had sex with a minor, defined in different ways, but sometimes as under the age of twenty-one. In these countries, homophile activists worked to set the same age of consent for same-sex as for heterosexual sex. In 1954, the ICSE newsletter reported on proposed changes to the Norwegian penal code, which would have fined any person who conducted a meeting or other gathering for homosexual persons without proper controls to prevent those under the age of twenty-one from entering.<sup>21</sup> In Germany and England, all male same-sex sex was illegal, and the ICSE put a great deal of effort into supporting German efforts to amend Paragraph 175, the law that criminalized male homosexuality. The International Committee also took great interest in the Wolfenden Committee in England, the group that deliberated about and ultimately recommended reform of the British penal code.<sup>22</sup> The prospects for legal reform in England—a country Methorst considered “in a hopelessly and despairing situation”—led the International Committee to shift focus away from Germany, where it had expended a great deal of effort, but after the Wolfenden Report appeared in 1957, the Committee bought a thousand copies in German translation with the intent to send them to members of the German parliament and other major figures.<sup>23</sup>

Although the organization insisted that it “extends its action fundamentally to all civilized countries of the earth,” the leaders had to admit that “at present the area of its activity is largely



confined to Europe.”<sup>24</sup> Because the ICSE relied on existing homophile groups to affiliate, there was little way to reach beyond the boundaries of Europe. In addition, homophile identity, as articulated in the ICSE and in national homophile organizations (Weeks 1977; D’Emilio 1983; Churchill 2008; Jackson 2009; Wolfert 2009; Pretzel 2010) assumed a common notion of what it meant to be homosexual. Some recognition of cultural differences in conceptions of same-sex sexuality emerges in the records. A document from the second congress called for “better mutual understanding between the Western and Oriental civilizations and those of the so-called underdeveloped countries,” suggesting that the introduction of the “Western anti-sexual way of life” would do harm to civilizations from which the West might learn much.<sup>25</sup> At the third congress, Methorst stated that “the homo-eroticism in Arabia f.i. [for instance] or in Greece, shows an entirely different aspect from ours.”<sup>26</sup> This suggests an awareness that a homophile identity might not have resonance in places beyond Europe and the “neo-Europes” (Crosby 1987) of the United States, Canada, and Australia.

### **Homosexual Cosmopolitanism and Sexually Expressive Culture**

Another less obvious way that the transnational homophile movement was shaped by European culture was in the importance of a traditional elite homosexual cosmopolitanism along with the impact of a (sometimes fraught) sexual expressiveness. Homosexual cosmopolitanism in this period—by which I mean the sense of a shared homosexual culture across national borders and interest in travel to partake of it—was not uniquely European, but because of the relative ease of travel among countries west of the Iron Curtain was more at play there. Sexual expressiveness within European homophile culture was not uniform, with notable differences between countries (Herzog 2009) and a certain ambivalence about sexualized images and connections to the urban homosexual subculture within homophile organizations (Churchill 2008), but in contrast to Britain and the United States, the only other countries in which

homophile groups existed, publications and events sometimes pushed the boundaries of respectability. The reigning assumption was that the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries—although, according to a Norwegian author, Denmark more than Norway and Norway more than Sweden—were relatively tolerant, that Germany, England, and the United States were puritanical, and that the “Latin countries” were backward.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of cosmopolitanism can be seen in a handwritten draft of an application form in the ICSE archives, making clear that one early vision of the organization was as a “necessary link that can bring you in contact with thousands of sympathetic fellows everywhere” through a magazine and card that would admit members to existing clubs in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.<sup>28</sup> And in fact congresses and business meetings included cultural events that drew members to the organization. One Danish participant wrote to thank the ICSE for the third congress, where he “contacted many friends of different nationalities and found the very importance of the international co-operation.”<sup>29</sup> An English physician commented on the “eager hands and friendly smiles” encountered in the conference hall and found the experience of hanging up his mask (the favored metaphor for being out at this time) “together with his hat and coat in the cloakroom” at the COC club in Amsterdam a “revelation.”<sup>30</sup> One letter, thanking the Amsterdam office for “the kindness and hospitality” of the first congress, expressed “real longing” for the “nice evenings in the club in Amsterdam.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, the ICSE utilized the desire to connect with others in a homosexual space to build the movement.

This kind of social connection across national borders was captured in the concept in this period of the “homintern,” a supposed vast international conspiracy of homosexual writers and artists who controlled the world of culture as anti-Communists imagined the Komintern sought to dominate the globe. A Danish newspaper reported that “the homosexualists in a number of European countries are in very close contact with each other, and that there exists a very wide-

spread network of contacts extending far beyond the frontiers of this country.”<sup>32</sup> That this was not only an external impression—the term “homintern” itself is attributed to gay poet W.H. Auden—is suggested by a comment from the editor of an early *Periodical Newsletter* that “homosexuals . . . are and have always been inclined to international, more or less impersonal or transient contacts.”<sup>33</sup>

The ICSE sought to mobilize this inclination to attract members. Along with dinners, the congresses featured dances and cabarets, connecting to the commercialized homosexual culture of the time. Member Marc Dufour, working to organize the first congress, wrote from Paris to ask if he needed to wear fancy dress to the Carnival dance, hoping that there would be “some costume available for me—Prince Charming of Queerland or a white naval uniform.” He also asked for “one or two really nice boys free from conjugal ties.”<sup>34</sup> The officers of the ICSE, expressing the ambivalence about such requests that permeated homophile organizations, responded that fancy dress was obligatory but “no travesty allowed,” that they were “too terribly busy organizing all this” to be able to help with the boys, and that he could find them himself in any case.<sup>35</sup> The proceedings of the Frankfurt meeting in 1957, held in the rooms of the *Cherie am Hafen*—“in bilingual literality: ‘My dearest on the waterfront!’”—on *Gutleutstrasse*—“The Street of Good People, literally”—commented on the “ironic circumstances and place names we ‘giddy’ people find ourselves in sometimes.”<sup>36</sup> The 1958 Brussels congress featured a *Soirée de Variétés* with performances by “Mae West,” “Little J.P.,” “Marlène and her boys,” “Lola Florès,” and “La Troupe du CCL” [the Belgian homophile group].<sup>37</sup>

Despite such appreciation for the campiness of homosexual culture and the kind of entertainment characteristic of commercial homosexual clubs, the ICSE leadership emphasized that they were “serious people” whose aims were “of a somewhat higher standard than only dancing and purely physical pleasure.”<sup>38</sup> ICSE editor Johannes Werres worried that “those who

came to the party” at the Frankfurt congress in 1952 “outnumbered by far those who joined our congress-sessions.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, despite such misgivings, the ICSE utilized the trappings of homosexual culture in its events. Expressing disgust with this familiar aspect of ICSE culture, a U.S. representative from ONE complained that the yearly meeting in Bremen opened with “a cabaret performance in drag [emphasis in original] of course, to which I did not go.”<sup>40</sup> As David Churchill (2008) has pointed out, U.S. homophile publications celebrated the virtues of Europe as a tourist destination but warned about European sexual culture, in particular working-class bars and commercial nightlife.

That some individuals had goals that were more personal than political in contacting the ICSE is clear from the letters that poured in from individuals seeking travel advice (especially about the laws in different countries), pen pals, or potential partners, although ICSE publications, unlike many European national homophile organs, did not include personal advertisements. Some of the letters were very explicit about particular erotic desires—a German man sought a big young man, “not a feminine type,” a Danish man wanted a uniformed “master” in riding boots, but not a sadist—and some were desperate—“LIFE is UNBEARABLE” from Australia, and “I NEED THIS URGENTLY, SO VERY MUCH. PLEASE!!!!!!” from California.<sup>41</sup> The organizational leadership seemed somewhat torn about these requests for personal assistance. Occasionally officers did give out travel advice and even post personal advertisements for correspondents in the COC’s magazine, *Vriendschap*.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, president, Henri Methorst, wrote to one U.S. man asking if he wanted to “adhere to our international movement” or was he “seeking personal friendship or correspondence,” and he lectured the Californian, who expressed interest in big strong masculine men, at length about the foolishness of looking for a companion half a world away. Even so, he published a personal ad for the man.<sup>43</sup> An Italian member, who lamented that his countrymen “are all only interested in the phallic love, and they

will cross [sic] all Europe for see a boy, but not to speak about our problems,” expressed the concern of some within the ICSE that the draw of personal connections would not attract the right kind of members.<sup>44</sup> That personal ads seemed especially inappropriate to U.S. homophiles is suggested by a contributor to ONE, who criticized a German periodical for “a good-sized ‘personals’ column in which men of thirty advertise for ‘young, blond, good-looking’ youths to accompany them on a trip to southern France.” He concluded that this was not the kind of publication “anyone would care to be caught with, in America at any rate” (quoted in Churchill 2008, 41).

The same kind of differentiation between Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries can be found in debates about appropriate representations of sexuality. A British man, for example, wrote from London before the first congress objecting to recruitment materials that, to him, gave “an impression of depressing inadequacy and moral bankruptcy,” adding that “you are probably unaware of the profound differences in behaviour between ‘our people’ here and on the Continent.”<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Joost Adriaansen, the first editor of the newsletter, warned of the need to consider different national sensibilities: “Articles that easily could be accepted in some countries on the continent could cause a scandal in Anglo-Saxon countries.”<sup>46</sup>

One aspect of the European cultural scene that “could cause a scandal in Anglo-Saxon countries” was the practice of publishing photographs and reproductions of works of art of boys, sometimes naked and sometimes scantily clothed. *Der Kreis*, the Swiss bi- and eventually trilingual journal (English was added to German and French in 1951), also featured photographs, illustrations, and fiction that eroticized young men, although the journal avoided any direct discussion of intergenerational relationships (Kennedy 1999; see also Evans 2013). This aesthetic, of course, hearkened back to the ancient Greek ideal of love between a man and a boy and has been, throughout time and across place, a more common conception than lack of

differentiation between sexual partners (Hekma 2008). Theo Sandfort (1987), in a study of pedophilia in the COC, argues that the period from 1946 to 1958 was characterized by a lack of distinction between the categories of homosexuality and pedophilia. This began to change in succeeding years, marked by the ICSE's proposal of the theme "Pedophilia versus Homosexuality" for its 1960 congress. Despite the apparent attempt to decouple the two phenomena, the theme aroused opposition. One member wrote from Denmark that it was "not a very happy choice" and that "people in general will be induced to connect the homosexual problem with attraction toward children—a misconception which is but too widespread already."<sup>47</sup> Karl Meier (pseudonym Rolf), longtime editor of *Der Kreis*, agreed that the theme was detrimental to movement goals.<sup>48</sup> In the end, most speakers turned down invitations, and the congress, at first postponed with another theme, never took place.

Yet, as Sandfort argues, there was an association between pedophilia and homosexuality in the postwar years, within as well as outside the movement, and the greater relative sexual expressiveness of European homophile culture brought the issue into the open in ways that are unimaginable in the United States. One of the most active officers of the International Committee, editor Johannes Werres, a German national, described himself publicly as a pederast interested in "youthful-looking partners above that dangerous age from fourteen to eighteen," if one who sublimated his desires and later formed a lasting relationship with a man older than he. A Danish friend then living in New York wrote to Werres in 1956 to ask "Why not enjoy what is available? The photograph or even the nearest boy."<sup>49</sup> Werres not only admitted his attraction to boys and young men and in the 1970s edited a publication titled *Boy Love News* but identified others in the homophile movement as "boy lovers" (Werres 1990).

The tensions over sexual expressiveness and pedophilia emerged clearly in what became known as the "Vennen affair." *Vennen* [*Friends*], an independent publication that was originally

put out by the Danish League of 1948, included photos of boys and young men in scanty clothing. In 1954, when *Vennen* applied for membership in the ICSE, fear of scandal led to objections. At a working session of the ICSE, a representative of the Danish League of 1948 objected to the level of the magazine, and a member from the Swedish homophile organization agreed, pointing to the photos and personal ads and adding, “We want no photos in a homosexual magazine of children under 18.” Another Swedish colleague asked the question of whether or not the photographs were pornographic and worried that such photos would “give a false impression of our movement.” In defense of *Vennen*, its representative insisted that “it is more important for us to publish a magazine that draws in a lot of homosexual readers than one that is acceptable to a few heterosexuals.” That they published a thousand copies, he insisted, showed its worth.<sup>50</sup> *Vennen*’s editor, Axel Lundahl Madsen, made the same point in a letter to the International Committee, asserting that it was “more important that our magazine pleases many [emphasis in original] homophiles than that it is accepted by a few heterophiles.”<sup>51</sup> A German member spoke up in the ICSE meeting to say that “he would be enormously rich if he could start a pornographic publication in Germany,” and this remark was met with great approval.<sup>52</sup>

Then, in 1955, the Danish police arrested Lundahl Madsen and his partner, Eigel Eskildsen, for distributing pornography and for sexual contact with men under the age of 18, based on the fact that they took some of the photos published in *Vennen* themselves (Wolfert 2009).<sup>53</sup> The two men also ran businesses that imported homosexual magazines and nude photographs of men. Raids on the offices of the businesses, which shared space with *Vennen*, led to the arrest of dozens of men. When the arrests of Lundahl Madsen and Eskildsen hit the newspapers, the ICSE scrambled to distance itself further from *Vennen*, emphasizing that the publication had applied for but not been admitted to the ICSE because of the “moral standard” of the periodical. The ICSE newsletter referred to the “unfortunate affair” in Copenhagen but added

optimistically that “surely no one possessing normal common sense will attach too much importance to the case, as dealing in so-called pornographic material, should this in fact have taken place, certainly is no privilege to homophile circles.”<sup>54</sup>

The *Vennen* affair shows that, despite ambivalence about erotic photographs and the International Committee’s attempt to disassociate homosexuality from pedophilia, there was acceptance in at least some of the European national movements for sexually expressive representations, including of boys and young men. These representations, along with the personal ads in many of the European publications and the emphasis on a cosmopolitanism focused on socializing across national borders, distinguished European homophile organizing from its counterparts across the English Channel and the Atlantic.

### **The Superiority of European Styles of Organizing**

The third way that we can see the European nature of transnational homophile organizing is in the assertion of the superiority of European ways. The first American to contact the International Committee was Henry Gerber, who had learned about homosexual activism as a GI in Germany and launched the short-lived Chicago Society for Human Rights in 1924. Writing from the U.S. Soldiers Home in the District of Columbia in 1951, he complained about how difficult it was to organize because “in America people are woefully ignorant of sex matters.”<sup>55</sup> A German immigrant to the United States wrote to the ICSE after learning of the founding congress from *Der Kreis*, lamenting the “dire and very discouraging absence of anything of its type in the United States,” and concluding that “for the time being, the more responsible ones among us here will have to look to Europe.”<sup>56</sup> The president of the ICSE responded that it was the mentality of the people in the United States that stood in the way, adding that despite legal obstacles German groups had sprung up shortly after the war, “inspired no doubt by the historical example of the first sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.”<sup>57</sup> Returning to his original point, the émigré



asserted that “I cannot help feeling, that the initial step must come from our side.”<sup>58</sup> Defending the honor of U.S. homophiles, Donald Webster Cory [pseudonym of Edward Sagarin], author of an influential early book about homosexuals as a minority group, wrote to the ICSE to assert that such views “fail to see the dynamics of the social changes in the United States, and only see the virtual impossibility of a movement that is patterned after the European scene.”<sup>59</sup>

The difference between European and “Anglo-Saxon” ways became even more pronounced once U.S. homophile groups joined in 1953. Their way of working struck the Europeans as too ambitious and optimistic. As Johannes Werres put it, reading about ONE was “like looking into a strange and sometimes curious country of a—you might excuse—fairy tale.” He conceded that he admired U.S. “courage, initiative, phantasy and hard working will, but— BUT I think (from my own European, typically German and Non-American point of view) you might as well do good or even better by doing just less.” And then he added, “I forget that you are Americans, and this means more optimism than realism.” William Lambert, from ONE, responded with a lecture about how the United States was settled by those who were not content to wait and how those who stayed on in Europe “produced the technological, political and cultural apathy which characterizes so much of the European scene.” He commented on “what we take to be the lessons from the German homophile movement, beginning with Hirschfeld and earlier. We feel that their great error was that they believed it was possible to build slowly, ‘patiently,’ and through the influence of highly-placed persons.” Ending on a more conciliatory note, he suggested that each side deepen their understanding of their differences—differences he saw to be stark.<sup>60</sup> When the president of the ICSE visited the United States in 1959, he commented in the ICSE *Newsletter* that the trip “showed how little we know about each other really on both sides of the ocean—of all three oceans we may well say!”<sup>61</sup>

Distinctions between Europe and the United States also emerged in reports in ICSE publications emphasizing the dangers of homosexual life in the United States in the context of McCarthyism. A Norwegian journalist visiting Dallas in 1951 reported that there were no organizations, pubs, or private clubs and that the bars were dangerous because of the plainclothes policemen, blackmailers, and mobsters who frequented them to arrest, blackmail, rob, or beat up gay men.<sup>62</sup> In Los Angeles, a 1954 article reported, “the situation as regards sexuality and particularly homoeroticism . . . can seem nothing but fantastic” for “anyone who has spent his life in the cities of Western Europe.”<sup>63</sup> A publication designed for the German-speaking countries reported on a visit to New York in 1957. In such a large city, the article noted, only 38 members belonged to the Mattachine Society. The anonymous author found Americans “immature,” described a raid on a bathhouse as “à la Hitler,” and described the United States as “this so-called democratic country.”<sup>64</sup> In all these ways, transnational homophile organizing declared its European character, in contrast to the repressed, naïve, and dangerous nature of homosexual life in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

The International Committee for Sexual Equality, by bringing together existing national homophile groups, carried on a legacy of organizing around sexual identity across national borders. In this sense, it was a transnational organization, yet it was also profoundly European. As we have seen, groups and individuals from northern and western Europe dominated the ICSE, with the Netherlands taking over from Germany as the center of transnational activism around same-sex sexuality. Although the organization had explicitly political goals, homosexual cosmopolitanism, including a desire for personal connection across national borders, and a relative openness to sexually expressive culture marked homophile activism as more European

than Anglo-Saxon. And the ICSE was, as debates with U.S. members made clear, also convinced of the superiority of European modes of organizing.

That the ICSE succeeded in uniting citizens from opposite sides of the lines of battle so soon after the end of a devastating war is a sign that the idea of Europe meant something to homophile activists. And, in fact, connections across national boundaries in Europe continued to play a role in the history of transnational gay activism. Although there is no absolutely straight line to connect the ICSE with the emergence of the ILGA, there are suggestive connections. A group known as the International Homophile World Organization, founded by the Axcils, moved across the border of Denmark to Germany in the 1960s and published a short-lived seven-language paper, *UNI: International Periodical for Friendship, Information, and Tolerance* (Wolfert 2009). Johannes Werres, in addition to Lundahl Madsen and Eskildsen, served as a link between the ICSE and the IHWO, although the two organizations never acknowledged a connection. When Lundahl Madsen was fighting for acceptance of *Vennen* in the ICSE, he had warned, “If our cooperation in the international work is not wanted, we intend to put our work on an international basis in the service of the homophile cause.”<sup>65</sup> In 1969 and 1970, the IHWO held international meetings in Denmark and Sweden, and in 1973, the COC, which remained suspicious of the IHWO, sponsored an international seminar that the IHWO attended along with other representatives from Germany and from Denmark, England, the Netherlands, and Norway (Wolfert 2009).

By the mid-1970s, both existing homophile and emerging gay liberation groups in Europe were organizing transnational conferences. Everywhere the older organizations found themselves out of sync with and criticized by the new liberation groups, although it would be a mistake to think of some definitive end of the homophile phase and beginning of gay liberation. At a gathering claiming to be the “First International Gay Rights Congress” in Edinburgh in

December 1974, Frank Kameny of the U.S. Mattachine Society, a figure who brought militance to the U.S. homophile movement, spoke at what was a very feminist and liberationist event.<sup>66</sup> In 1975, the COC sponsored a conference on women and men in homosexual movements in the Netherlands, attended by representatives of the homophile groups in Belgium, Norway, and Great Britain.<sup>67</sup> The Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), which represented Britain at that conference and which had had contact with the ICSE, in 1978 announced that its annual conference in Coventry would have an “international flavour” as an International Liaison Commission would be meeting at the same time, bringing together “delegates from homophile organizations” in the European Economic Commission countries, the United States, Canada, and Jamaica.<sup>68</sup>

It was that meeting, attended by representatives from the COC, the Danish *Forbundet af 1948*, and the Swedish *Riksforbundet for Sexuellt Likaberattigande*, all groups that had belonged to the ICSE, that gave birth to the ILGA. At the first annual conference of the new group in the Netherlands the next year, delegates from seventeen countries established “a network of political cooperation and informational exchange to link gay organizations at [the] global level.” Resolutions echoed the ICSE’s focus on the United Nations, calling for the revocation of the World Health Organization’s classification of homosexuality as a disease and calling for consultative status at the UN, although a new tone was evident in statements of support for the women’s movement, attention to gay rights in the Third World, and sensitivity to transsexuals and transvestites.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, both the Edinburgh conference in 1974 and the new International Gay Association [IGA] discussed the rights of “sexual minorities,” by which they meant sadists, masochists, and pedophiles, in the context of the Council of Europe’s Committee on Decriminalization. Participants at an IGA workshop in England in 1979 discussed “pedophilia

and its particular urgency for the gay and lesbian movement,” with the Danish *Forbundet af 1948*, which had so distanced itself from the *Axgils* and *Vennen*, coordinating consideration of age of consent laws.<sup>70</sup> Ironically, it was this very issue that lost the ILGA consultative status at the UN in 1995 when right-wing groups in the United States charged that some member groups, in particular the North American Man-Boy Love Association, promoted pedophilia, and the U.S. Senate threatened to withhold payments to the United Nations.<sup>71</sup>

Although now countries from around the world have joined the ILGA, whatever might be characterized as a transnational LGBT culture is no longer marked as European, and assertions of European superiority are not part of public discourse, the continuing centrality of Europe in the technically global ILGA and the strength of ILGA-Europe, as Phillip Ayoub and David Paternotte point out in the introduction, speak to the predominance of European influence (see also Ayoub and Paternotte 2014). In 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution endorsing LGBT rights for the first time, finally meeting the demands that the ICSE made sixty years earlier.

One consequence of the long history of European leadership of transnational activism around sexuality is the identification of the rights of sexual minorities as a European value, as many chapters in this volume (particularly those by Ayoub and Paternotte, Colpani and Habed, and Moss) suggest. Another is the creation of a dominant “Western” notion of the contours of gay and lesbian identity. The contemporary Western notion of homosexuality as defined by sexual object choice, rather than gender inversion or sexual role, spread from European sexologists to other parts of the world, reversing the previous European conception of same-sex desire as something found in the Middle East or Asia or Africa and fostering the notion in many places that homosexuality is a Western perversion (Bleys 1995, Rupp 2009). As numerous scholars have pointed out (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, Povinelli and Chauncey 1999, Grewal

and Kaplan 2001, Manalansan 2003, Boelstorff 2005), there is a gay and lesbian identity based on Western conceptions that is understood in various places around the world, but it has not displaced indigenous identities and understandings of what it means to have same-sex desire. What I would suggest is that there is a history to that dominance of European—which is now more in sync with the U.S. and so has become “Western”—concepts of sexual identity, and that we would do well to understand how the trajectory of transnational organizing and the struggle to forge a global gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identity has been profoundly shaped by the imagined and experienced community of Europe.

Notes

1 Some of the text in this chapter appeared originally in Leila J. Rupp, "The Persistence of Transnational Organizing: The Case of the Homophile Movement," *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 1014-1039.

2 Report of the First International Congress for Sexual Equality, Whitsuntide 1951, Amsterdam," Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum [COC], 1940-1971, 2.19.038, [hereafter NL-HaNA, COC], box 158; "Telegramm an die UNO," *Der Kreis* 7 (Juli 1951), 1. See also *Periodical Newsletter from the ICSE*, n.d. [September 1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

3 "An instructive interview with the chairman of the world's largest homosexual organization: the C.O.C. in the Netherlands," *ICSE Newsletter*, March 1957, ICSE, ONE, LA; F.v.M. [Floris van Mechelen], "Short Historical Survey of the Dutch C.O.C." *Periodical Newsletter of the ICSE*, July 1953, International Committee for Sexual Equality files, ONE Institute and Archives, Los Angeles [hereafter ICSE, ONE, LA].

4 "An instructive interview with the chairman of the world's largest homosexual organization: the C.O.C. in the Netherlands," *ICSE Newsletter*, March 1957, ICSE, ONE, LA.

5 "Letters from Readers," *Periodical Newsletter from the ICSE*, no. 4, n.d. [1952], NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

6 "Historique," n.d. [1960], German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 166; Jan de Groot to Canadian Council on Religion and the Homosexual Incorporated, December 13, 1965, NL-HaNA, COC, box 168; Floris van Mechelen, "Perspektiven der Bewegung für sexuelle Gleichberechtigung Ihre Wege und Ziele," *Der Kreis* 20 (October 1952), 7-8; Floris van Mechelen, "Short Historical Survey of the Dutch C.O.C.," *Periodical Newsletter of the ICSE*, July 1953, ICSE, ONE, LA; Draft of invitation, n.d. [January 1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

7 "A World Parliament," n.d., NL-HaNA, COC, box 158.

8 "Holland ruft auf zur internationalen Mitarbeit," *Der Kreis* 7 (July 1951), 3-6.



9 Bernardino del Boca de Villaregia to 2d congress of the I.C.S.E., August 12, 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 158.

10 "Holland ruft auf zur internationalen Mitarbeit," *Der Kreis* 7 (July 1951), 3-6.

11 Jack Argo, "Congress Impressions," *Periodical Newsletter*, October 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

12 Werner Schlemmer-Meyer to Lieber Freund, August 21, 1954, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

13 Dieter Berner to ICSE, July 23, 1954, German; Erwin Haarmann to ICSE, October 5, 1954, German, box 161-162, NL-HaNA. COC; Dieter Berner to ICSE, July 23, 1954, German; Erwin Haarmann to ICSE, October 5, 1954, German, box 161-162, NL-HaNA. COC.

14 Report of the Meeting of February 5<sup>th</sup> 1959, ICSE, ONE, LA.

15 Clive Alderson to Dear Subscriber, *ICSE Newsletter*, August 1958, ICSE, ONE, LA; Floris van Mechelen to ONE, January 15, 1955, NL-HaNA, COC, box 163; Gert Lantman to Liebe Freunde, April 27, 1957, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 165.

16 "Protokoll der Arbeitssitzung des I.C.S.E.," Copenhagen, October 23-25, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 164.

17 Norbert Weissenhagen, "ICSE-Radaktie," German, in "Witboek," February 28, 1957, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160.

18 [Holger] Bramlev to ICSE, July 8, 1954, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162; Wayne to Don [Slater], n.d. [1958], ICSE, ONE, LA.

19 Ewald Bohm to Herr Angelo, November 9, 1954, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

20 The same was true of laws in Belgium and France.

21 “Report from Norway on the amendments of the penal code”; Hans Weil, “Bericht aus Schweden,” *ICSE Newsletter*, March-April 1954, ICSE, ONE, LA.

22 “Protokoll der Arbeitssitzung des I.C.S.E.,” October 23-25, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 164; Bob Angelo to Secretary of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, May 14, 1955, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162; *Periodical Newsletter*, Bulletin No. 5, July 1955, ICSE, ONE, LA.

23 “Witboek inzake de werkzaamheden en resultaten van het ICSE in her afgelopen jaar 1956,” February 28, 1957, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160 (translation by Nanette Pawelek); “Brief Minutes of the Business Session of the I.C.S.E. at Brussels, 1958; “Protokoll der I.C.S.E.-Arbeitstagung in Bremen,” August 8-9, 1959, ICSE, ONE, LA.

24 “Zur Information für die Presse,” June 24, 1957, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160.

25 Petition of the Second International Congress for Sexual Equality Assembled at Frankfurt Germany,” August 29-September 2, 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 158. See Churchill (2008) for an analysis of the ways that transnational homophile culture mobilized non-Western cultures to argue for the naturalness of homosexuality.

26 “Report of the Third International Congress of the International Committee for Sex Equality,” September 12-14, 1953, NL-HaNA, COC, box 158.

27 On the Scandinavian countries, see O.E., “Conditions in Norway,” *Periodical Newsletter*, March 1953, NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

28 Handwritten drafts, n.d. [1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

29 Jørgen Tews to ICSE, September 20, 1953, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

30 "From England a physician, participant of the third congress wrote us the following," n.d. [1953], NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

31 Kaj Staun to Bob Angelo, June 1, 1951, NL-HaNA, COC, box 158.

32 "International Pornography Affair Disclosed in Copenhagen," typescript, n.d.; "Declaration," n.d., NL-HaNA, COC, box 163.

33 "Letters from Readers," *Periodical Newsletter*, no. 4, n.d., NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

34 Marc [Dufour] to Dear friends, January 16, [1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

35 Bob Angelo and Floris van Mechelen to Marc Dufour, January 28, [1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

36 "Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the ICSE," Frankfurt, June 29-30, 1957, ICSE, ONE, LA.

37 "Programme du Congres de L'ICSE à Bruxelles," May 23-26, 1958, NL-HaNA, COC, box 1645; "Soirée de Variétés," May 24, 1948, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160.

38 ICSE to H.W. Ehrman, August 5, 1959, NL-HaNA, COC, box 165.

39 Jack Argo, "Congress Impressions," *Periodical Newsletter*, October 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

40 Wayne to Don [Slater], n.d. [August 1959], ICSE, ONE, LA.

41 Werner Schlemmer-Meyer to Lieber Freund, August 21, 1954, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162; N.W. Bugge to Dear Sir, August 25, 1960, NL-HaNA, COC, box 166; H.W. Ehrmann to ICSE, March 12, 1960, NL-HaNA, COC, box 166; Frank Peterson to Director, COC, March 7, 1955, NL-HaNA, COC, box 163.

42 Handwritten drafts, n.d. [1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

43 Floris van Mechelen to Robert Crosby, July 4, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162;

Floris van Mechelen to Frank Peterson, May 16, 1955, NL-HaNA, COC, box 163.

44 Bernardino del Boca de Villaregia to Floris van Mechelen, February 23, 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162. See also H. Bramlev to ICSE, February 4, 1959, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 165; "Protokoll der I.C.S.E.-Arbeitstagung in Bremen," August 8-9, 1959, ICSE, ONE, LA.

45 Geoffrey A. Whitall to Mr. Angelo, January 24, 1951, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

46 Joost Adriaansen, "Editorial," *Periodical Newsletter from the ICSE*, no. 4, n.d. [1952], NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

47 Dermot Mack to ICSE, January 27, 1960, NL-HaNA, COC, box 166.

48 Rolf to Liebe Kamaraden, May 16, 1960, German, NL-HaNA, COC, box 166.

49 Unsigned letter to Johannes, November 25, 1956, NL-HaNA, COC, box 159.

50

"Protokoll der Arbeitssitzung des I.C.S.E.," October 23-25, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 164.

51 A.J. Lundahl-Madsen to ICSE, October 24, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.

52

"Protokoll der Arbeitssitzung des I.C.S.E.," October 23-25, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 164.

53

Wolfert, who had access to Lundahl Madsen and his papers, reports the charge. The only document in the ICSE files to mention this aspect of the case is the confidential Dutch "White Book," which reports that, in addition to the sale of pornographic photos, Lundahl Madsen was imprisoned for "copulation with underage boys." "Witboek inzake de werkzaamheden en resultaten van het ICSE in her afgelopen jaar 1956," February 28, 1957, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160 (translation by Nanette Pawelek).

54 F.L., "The I.C.S.E. and Modern International Trends," *Periodical Newsletter*, Bulletin No. 5, July 1955, ICSE, ONE, LA.

- 55 Henry Gerber to ICSE, no date [received January 26, 1951], NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.
- 56 Henry Sergévich to Bob Angelo, October 23, 1951, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.
- 57 Floris van Mechelen to Henry Sergevich, November 2, 1951, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-16
- 58 Henry Sergévich to Florian [sic] van Mechelen, December 15, 1951, NL-HaNA, COC, box 160.
- 59 D.W. Cory to Floris van Mechelen, July 3, 1952, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.
- 60 Jack Argo to Editors of ONE, May 31, 1957; Bill L[ambert] to Jack Argo, June 27, 1957, NL-HaNA, COC, box 165.
- 61 "ICSE President Floris van Mechelen visits the U.S.A.," *ICSE Newsletter*, December 1959.
- 62 "Homosexual Life in Dallas, Texas," *Periodical Newsletter from the ICSE*, November 1951.
- 63 Robert Freigedank, "Los Angeles 'The home of Angels,'" *ICSE Newsletter*, March-April 1954.
- 64 "Man schreibt uns: Das ist Gay New York heute!" *ICSE-KURIER*, no. 3, April 1957.
- 65 A.J. Lundahl-Madsen to ICSE, German, October 24, 1954, NL-HaNA, COC, box 161-162.
- 66 "First International Gay Rights Congress," Hall Carpenter Archives [HCA], London School of Economics, Ephemera/164. I am grateful to Justin Bengry for research assistance in London.
- 67 "Conference on women – men cooperation in homosixual [sic] movements," May 1975, Oegstgeest, the Netherlands, HCA, Ephemera/219.
- 68 CHE News Release, June 20, 1978, HCA, CHE/8/19.
- 69 IGA press release, April 16, 1979, HCA, Ephemera/361.
- 70 IGA, Informal workshop, Brighton, England, August 24-27, 1979, HCA, Palmer/7/2/6.

71 See Craig Kaczorowski, "International Lesbian and Gay Association," *gbtq: an encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, & queer culture*, [http://www.gbtq.com/social-sciences/int\\_lesbian\\_gay.html](http://www.gbtq.com/social-sciences/int_lesbian_gay.html), accessed August 14, 2009.

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