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BORDERLINE WORK: ILO EXPLORATIONS ONTO THE HOUSING SCENE UNTIL  
1940

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The initial years of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Labour Office (hereafter ‘the Office’) were characterised by a deliberate impetus to consolidate the status of the new organisation and its secretariat, but also by significant attempts to expand its province. First Office director Albert Thomas claimed very early that the Peace Treaty was empowering the ILO to seize up more than the eight hour day and other industrial conditions. In 1920, he felt confident enough to suggest an administrative set up for this expansion, and suggested that the co-operative section of the Office would be the most adequate platform to conquer this “wider sphere”, because the co-operative movement was deeply engaged with issues pertaining to the workers’ living conditions.<sup>1</sup> Among these, wrote Thomas, housing and transport facilities were especially important for the

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Thomas “The task of the International Labour Office”, in John Solano, (ed), *Labour as an international problem* (London, 1920), pp.259-260

welfare of workers. He did not mention it, but Thomas's own views about housing were in favour of cooperative and governmental action to facilitate housing construction or to build housing.<sup>2</sup> Though, most of his subsequent attempts to place housing within the province of the ILO did not materialise on the agenda of annual Labour conferences, nor did they form the basis of any convention or recommendation while he was heading the organisation. Only after World War 2, in the wake of the different UN declarations and covenants on economic, social and cultural rights, would housing make its way into ILO standards. Housing was mentioned in the Philadelphia declaration of 1944, and this seems to have cleared the ground. A number of reports and surveys, especially in Asia or Africa, were made in the 1950s, and Recommendation No. 115 on Worker's Housing was adopted at the forty-fourth session of the ILO Governing Body on 7 June 1961. Housing has

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas' views in favor of a public and non for profit policy of housing were fostered during the early 1900s in the Groupe d'Etudes Socialistes, the "think tank" of his municipal socialism. See Patrizia Dogliani, *Un laboratorio di socialismo municipale. La Francia 1870-1920* (Milano 1992), part 2 and Christophe Prochasson, "Entre science et action sociale : le réseau Albert Thomas et le socialisme normallien 1900-1914", in Christian Topalov (ed), *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France 1880-1914* (Paris, 1999), pp.141-158.

become a basic aspect of workers' rights in many conventions ever since, e.g. Convention 169 on indigenous and tribal people in independent countries from 1989. This presence contrasts with the absence of housing in the pre-war history of the ILO, when it was side tracked as other themes pertaining to the 'welfare of workers'.

It is worth noticing that Recommendation 115 does not include any hint to previous ILO forays in the field. This would be another reason for leaving them in oblivion. If the ILO did not manage to establish its authority on housing, nor to produce norms about it, during the 1920s or 1930s, then why should we care for it? Isn't it more worthy to focus on the areas where it was an effective international organisation, and managed to regulate and constitute the world of labour, to provide "rules for the world", in the terms used by Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore?<sup>3</sup> Though, we have clues that the history of failures is as much revealing as the history of successes. Charles Tilly warned us that we can learn from what did not happen, and from possibilities that were discarded.<sup>4</sup> Explorations into the history and sociology of science have been especially good at demonstrating the worthiness of studying failures: they usually disclose the very mechanisms that had been at

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the world. International organizations in global politics* (Ithaca, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Tilly, *As Sociology meets History* (New York, 1981), p.212.

work to establish a discipline, an institution, a theme, or a paradigm, because success and institutionalisation have not placed a discreet veil on the practical operations that were involved the process.<sup>5</sup> International organisations being more often castigated for their failures than their successes, especially those that were born out of the Versailles Treaty,<sup>6</sup> they should be a mine of intriguing failure cases. Those should present us with many opportunities to capture their work as bureaucratic organisations trying to expand or preserve their boundaries.

The ILO is especially interesting because of the clear desire of the director and staff of its international secretariat to escape what they perceived as the

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<sup>5</sup> See Roy Wallis (ed), *On the Margins of Science : The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge* (Keele, 1979), and the special issue of the French journal *Genèses, Sciences sociales improbables* , 29 (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. example the treatment of the League of Nations in Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (New York, 2005) and Patricia Clavin and Jens-Wilhelm Wessels “Transnationalism and the League of Nations: understanding the work of its Economic and Financial Organisation”, *Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), pp.465-492. The current interest for technical cooperation at the League is changing former assessments that were based on the failure of the League in high politics of war and peace.

straightjacket of their constitution: what we have at hand is a test tube where the agency of an international organization can be observed as it tried to establish its authority over contested grounds. The case of housing, a borderline theme that did not make it to the mainstream of ILO policy, will be examined from this point of view. After a narrative of the failed attempt to bring housing firmly within the ILO province, I will reconstruct some of the strategies of the Office leadership as they tried, very proactively, to muster support and to enrol knowledge and public opinion. One of the salient aspects of this strategy, the interaction of the Office with international associations will be put in perspective in the last section, for its relevance to current relationships between intergovernmental organisations and international nongovernmental organisations.

## **1. Prologue: milestones on a failure track**

During the 4th session of the International Labour Conference, in November 1922, two Italian delegates presented a resolution project that asked the Office to launch studies about housing.<sup>7</sup> This was the first apparition of housing within the ILO official documents. The resolution was

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<sup>7</sup> Resolution 8, in Bureau International du Travail , *Conférence Internationale du Travail, Compte rendu définitif, 4<sup>th</sup> session* (Geneva 1922), p.147.

deferred to the Office Governing Body, and Thomas made the point for housing during the 17<sup>th</sup> session in February 1923. He insisted that housing was an international question and a labour question, and that the disjuncture between a growing demand and a falling supply had caused a housing crisis. Common causes and possible common solutions had to be sought at the international level. For all these reasons, housing qualified for the Office's attention under the aegis of Article 427 of the Peace Treaty, which invoked the "welfare of the workers". Despite the financial difficulties of the Office, and beyond the blunt opposition of a number of members, whose word was carried by the conservative parliamentary secretary to the British Ministry of labour, Archibald Boyd Carpenter, the housing studies were voted by a narrow margin (nine vs seven).<sup>8</sup> Thomas nevertheless had to agree that the Office would focus on comparing methods, and this was a concession to Boyd Carpenter's argument that the Office should not mingle with national policies.

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<sup>8</sup> Bureau International du Travail , *Procès verbaux de la 17<sup>e</sup> session du Conseil d'administration du BIT*, (Geneva, 1923), 17 February 1923, p.66. At the same session, Thomas had presented his note on "spare time" to the Governing Body, in the hope that the subject would be placed in front of the 1923 Labour Conference delegates. The Governing Body deferred the examination of this note to 1924, and resisted to the Director's expansion policy on this front.

There was not a lot of space to manoeuvre. The visible result of this comparative work was the publication of two volumes on housing in Europe and in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The initial idea of a new subdivision dedicated to housing and welfare was not followed up for lack of funds, but the Austrian staff member who was in charge of the two volumes was, according to his superior “a little service on his own”.<sup>10</sup>

These studies were widely circulated and favourably commented, and the Director began to work on a ‘recommendation’ about spare time to be submitted to the VIth session of the Labour Conference. The proposed recommendation included housing, among other articles dealing with after hours work, education or anti alcoholism, and praised the provision of healthy and affordable housing “if necessary through the action of local and national administrations”. The commission in charge of elaborating the final draft met several times during the 1924 Conference, amidst the opposition of the employers’ group and a request from the UK government to limit the subject matter. The result was nevertheless a confirmation of the proposed recommendation, the housing bit being even promoted to a section of its

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<sup>9</sup> *European housing problems since the war 1914-1923* (Genève, 1924); *Les conditions de logement aux Etats-Unis* (Genève, 1925).

<sup>10</sup> ILO archives (hereafter ILO), Hugo von Haan personnel file, Meekers’ grading report for 1924.

own. Recommendation 21 on the Utilisation of Spare Time was adopted without opposition by the 1924 Conference. Housing seemed to inch its way on the ILO agenda. This modest success was nevertheless edged by the post-scriptum delivered at the Governing Body during its following session.

Humbert Wolfe, the British principal assistant secretary of the Ministry of Labour, insisted that housing was a border line aspect of the Office work, impinging on the field of public health that belonged into the League of Nations domain. A coalition of employers and governments, with common concerns but different reasons not to let the ILO expand its domain, was taking shape.

The Office was still moving ahead, though, and Thomas felt secure enough to show his hand to the Labour Conference in 1926. His report listed two types of measures to solve the housing crisis, i.e tenant protections legislation (mostly about rent levels) and building policy, and claimed the growing favour of the second across different countries. One year later, his report to the Conference proudly announced that the Office had completed a study of housing statistics, in cooperation with local and national governments. That was a nice opening for the message that followed: the solution to the housing crisis was being found in the increasing proactive policies of public authorities in the field. Thomas made his gambit at the 1928 Conference, and his report boldly claimed that the movement of public opinion in favour of public housing was growing and that the Bureau was the

right institution in the right place to provide fuel, impulse and direction to this movement. The Director's report for 1928 stated that the housing question had clearly entered a second phase, and that the measures for tenants protection had yielded to the provision of new housing by public authorities and non for profit organisations, while the private sector could not cope.<sup>11</sup> During the Conference itself, opportunity was given for Thomas to push this further. Chaman Lall, an Indian workpeople's delegate, asked for a general study of the housing question and living conditions of the workers, especially out of Europe. His resolution, seconded by a Japanese delegate, moved that the Office should launch studies on the subject and have them examined at a next Conference. The Director's report to the following Governing Body conflated Lall's resolution with the movement in public opinion in favour of housing and the development of building public policies in Germany, the UK and France.<sup>12</sup> It stated that the Office was familiar with the

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Topalov wrote that 1928 was a peak for wave in favour of public housing in Europe, with the vote of the Loucheur Law in France and before the recovery of the private sector in Germany and the United Kingdom. See "La politique de l'habitat dans les politiques sociales 1900-1940. Notes pour un débat", *Cahiers de la recherche architecturale*, 15-17 (1985), pp.10-17.

<sup>12</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42* (Genève, 1928), pp.580-582.

question, and ready to launch wide ranging studies. In fact, the report went on, “answering in advance” Lall’s resolution, the Office was already preparing an important work on urban housing in Europe since the war ! This was, said Thomas, the sign that the Office was now a centre of information and experience sharing about housing, and would soon be able to draft a convention or a recommendation about the most effective methods in the field. The Office’s report on Lall’s resolution was also keen to demonstrate that housing was firmly within the its realm. Acknowledging the 1922 and 1924 discussions about its “borderline issue” status, it concluded “everyone in interested circles agrees that no organisation than ours is better qualified to tackle this problem”.<sup>13</sup>

Such an affirmation was contested, yet, and some Governing Body members expressed concern about the appropriateness of the housing forays during the Warsaw meeting in October 1928. Different workers’ delegates were keen to support the Director’s request for new studies and the possibility of a convention/recommandation. But John Ballingal Forbes Watson, the director of the British National Confederation of Employers’ Organization, made it clear that on one hand he saw housing as part of public health, which belonged in the province of the League of Nations (whose

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<sup>13</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d’administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p.580.

secretary was the English Sir Eric Drummond), and on the other that housing was just not within the ILO's purview. He concluded by a warning about possible complaints by national governments against these infringements.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas acknowledged the brunt by stating that the time for conventions had not come yet, and that more studies were needed. The Office's report was nevertheless approved, and the ongoing studies given official status. This was a warning though, and the projects for a second volume on rural housing that would have extended beyond Europe were trimmed after this session, in what sounds as a clear concession to the League of Nations' growing interest into rural public health.<sup>15</sup> The office nevertheless kept going in 1928 and early 1929, and extra personnel was provided to gather data for the housing studies.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas seemed decided to push the envelope always further, and tried to find another way to a recommendation/convention. In a report to the Governing Body, presented during the 45<sup>th</sup> session in June 1929, he proposed to hold a statisticians' conference about housing, in order to harmonise

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<sup>14</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administratio, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p. 518-519.

<sup>15</sup> ILO, Guye personnel file, Guye's memorandum, 15 August 1930.

<sup>16</sup> The volume on housing statistics was published in 1928 as *Les méthodes de la statistique de l'habitation*, (Genève , 1928).

statistical categories. This had been a familiar pattern in the reform movement all across the North Atlantic world, and especially within the circles of labour reform: once common problem setting categories were stabilized, common problem solving measures could be proposed.<sup>17</sup> But this was a bridge too far for housing: at the following Governing Body session, Forbes Watson led the charge, and reiterated his opinion that housing was not into the purview of the Office. Thomas did defend his position that article 396 of the Peace Treaty placed housing within the Office's scope, and the French union leader Jouhaux concurred, but for the first time Thomas seems to have been on the backswing: decision was deferred. The trend was confirmed in the Fall of 1929. During the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the governing body, the discussion waffled about a statistical conference on work accidents when Forbes Watson unexpectedly launched the onslaught in the usual form: if it considered housing in general, the conference would be out of its domain and into that of the League; the competence of the ILO was limited to working conditions; the Labour Conference should limit itself to the kind of housing that was part

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<sup>17</sup> This method was used across the political spectrum in many different countries, from the Pittsburgh Survey to the social studies of Booth or Le Play. Christian Topalov has studied this pattern in his study of unemployment reform activities in the North Atlantic world. Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur 1880-1910* (Paris, 1994).

of the worker's wages ("*couchage*"), that is when housing is provided by the employer as part of the labour contract). The verbatim notes, which were not printed integrally into the official minutes, mention that Thomas upheld his point about the fact housing belonged to the Office's sphere, and concluded he would answer later during the discussion of his report.<sup>18</sup> But Forbes Watson had turned off the light, quite likely increasing the pressure during corridor talks and finding enough support to make any further discussion useless. The housing statistics conference was not discussed during this session, nor in any other until Thomas' death in 1932. In October 1929, even before the beginning of the Depression that pushed Thomas to reframe the Office agenda, he had given up on housing.<sup>19</sup> The available material do not bring additional information to explain this abrupt stop. One can only guess that Forbes Watson 'no go' was supported by a number of governing body members who approved the idea that the ILO had to focus on 'proper' labour issues, though their reasons might have been different from the ones he set forth. Employers would have been reluctant to both the emphasis on public housing and the integration of housing issues within discussion on industrial

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<sup>18</sup> ILO, D 746/102/2, Verbatim Governing Body, session 46.

<sup>19</sup> Denis Guérin, *Albert Thomas au BIT, 1920-1932. De l'internationalisme à l'Europe* (Genève, 1996), p.70 sqq.

conditions, while governmental delegations would resent both the intrusion of an intergovernmental body within national policies, and the

After 1929, Thomas' Conference reports did not stop to stress the continuing growth of governmental housing policies as social policies. He even mentioned that the Office was still gathering documentation and preparing for a conference on housing statistics (1930), and the report supported a Japanese proposal made at the 1932 conference to place housing on the agenda of a future conference. But there was no follow up with the governing body any more. There, post 1929 Office reports on housing subjects were quite brief. In 1932 Thomas recorded the stalemate: documentation about the extra European world was still too fragmented, he said, that the subject was not ripe for consideration by the Conference. Subsequently, only "*couchage*" was subsequently placed on the agenda of the 1935 session of the Conference. An exploration of the Office's archives reveals that housing had been de facto abandoned after 1929. Robert Guye, the Swiss staff member who had specialized in housing studies since 1927, completed and published *La politique du logement en Europe: la construction d'habitations à bon marché* in 1930. Immediately after the publication of the volume, he began to work on wages statistics.<sup>20</sup> The Office stopped to collect documentation on housing, and the statistical section limited its

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<sup>20</sup> ILO, Guye personnel file, Guye's memorandum, 1932.

investigations to the evolution of rents: as an element of the workers' budget, this was certainly deemed an aspect of housing that was appropriate to the Office's mission.<sup>21</sup> Just the kind of understanding advocated by Forbes Watson in 1929. Meanwhile, the League of Nations Health Section moved into the field, far away from the eyes and input of the workers' delegates.

A housing report was prepared for the 1931 League European Conference on Rural Hygiene, and several volumes published in 1935 and 1936 that grasped both urban and rural housing on behalf of the Health section,<sup>22</sup> while the Economic and Financial organization of the League began to pile up statistics about the building business. The 1936 General Assembly asked for a report on urban and rural housing, to be established by the Health section. The report was to study building techniques as well as financial, economic and social sides in order to establish the rationales of a housing policy for the "economically weak" fractions of the population. In this framework, the Office was to provide an ancillary contribution with the data from its rent

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<sup>21</sup> See *International Labour Review*, august 1933, june 1934 and May 1935, as well as the *ILO yearbook 1934-1935*, vol.II., for publications on rents.

<sup>22</sup> Results were published in *Séries de la Société des nations*, III, Hygiène, volume 3 (France), 5 (Netherlands) and 6 (Italy).

statistics.<sup>23</sup> Housing had escaped to the League. When the Governing Body asked for new housing studies, in 1938, the scope and timing of the proposed report was clearly subordinated to the ongoing League program.<sup>24</sup> The contested division of labour between the two intergovernmental organisations, which also materialised in several other situations,<sup>25</sup> was another factor that led to the sidetracking of the housing question from the Office's activities. In 1929 about housing, or in 1927 at the time of the International Economic Conference, Thomas did not find the resources to succeed in this boundary skirmishes.

## **2. Engineering authority: the mobilisation of knowledge and public opinion**

International organizations, either intergovernmental ones born from the Versailles Treaty or international associations, did not command sovereignty

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<sup>23</sup> See ILO, W 8/1 for the “subordinated” collaboration of the Office with the League on urban and rural housing studies in 1937.

<sup>24</sup> ILO archives, W 8/0/1, Statement to be submitted to the Governing Body on studies of the ILO on the question of housing. The correspondence pertaining to the establishment of the new report began in June 1939, just before the war.

<sup>25</sup> See Guérin , *Albert Thomas*

and its attributes (i.e the ability to have its decisions enforced), but they tried to conquer authority. That is, the ability to induce deference and attention from others.<sup>26</sup> Among the different kinds of strategy that can be used to win authority, the Office leadership's attempt to expand the ILO's sphere to housing matters relied on two specific ideas. One was to enrol the support of "public opinion" to demonstrate that worldwide standards in housing policies were needed, that the Office was recognised as a protagonist of their elaboration, and that these standards should emphasize the construction by public authorities. The second was to lean upon scientific knowledge to showcase the existence of a housing crisis, the commonality of problems in a number of countries, and the existence of tools that allowed to define an "issue" and solve it. On both fronts, the Office leadership had a very proactive attitude, and did not limit its activity to list supporters or to collect data. It also included sophisticated plots that made the most out of the political, social and scientific networks commanded by the Office staff. The rationale for such shrewdness was best expressed in a note of July 1922. Even if the Office leadership felt strong about the fact that housing was well

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<sup>26</sup> On this issue, see Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules*, chap 1, and John Boli, "Conclusion : world authority structures and legitimations", in John Boli and George M. Thomas (eds), *Constructing world culture. International nongovernmental organisations since 1875* (Stanford 1999), pp.267-300.

into the ILO's province according to the Peace Treaty, it was aware of the "technical problem" that loomed large: if we ask the question "immediately and under official form, we are likely to run into troubles", wrote Thomas or his chief of cabinet.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, it was a constant concern to work in a roundabout way. Thomas would relentlessly emphasize the fact that public opinion recognised the Office as the most appropriate agency to handle international aspects of housing.<sup>28</sup> He would also continuously insist that the Office's mission, here as in other fields, was to observe and compare housing "experiences" in different countries, winnowing them until lessons could be drawn: policy making thus borrowed to the methods of the life and physical sciences, and captured some of their power to tell the truth.<sup>29</sup> Eventually,

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<sup>27</sup> ILO, CAT 10-41, Incident Pribram Ferenczi, Note pour une conversation avec Mr Ferenczi à propos de son mémoire sur l'habitation, 22 Juillet 1922.

<sup>28</sup> See his different reports to the Conference or to the Governing Body between 1922 and 1929.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas had made this a management method when he staffed his Ministry of Armament with young durkheimians during the War. Such a view was not uncommon in post war France, where several politicians and intellectuals stroke this key, especially Edouard Herriot in *Créer* (1919) and Maxime Leroy in *Pour gouverner* (1919). See Lion Murard and Patrick Zylberman, "De

the Office developed a daring policy in regard to international associations, trying to tie them to the success of his housing forays as warrants of scientific objectivity and public opinion support.

### *Enrolling public opinion*

Public opinion on housing was, accordingly, not only to be collected, but to be aroused and made obvious. The diffusion of the housing studies were an obvious method, and Hugo von Haan smartly suggested that the very first should be sent them to national experts before publication in order to create a favourable atmosphere.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, the Office developed a range of tools to make it visible that public opinion was in favour of public housing, and in favour of an intervention of the ILO in this sphere. Following the sketch that Hugo von Haan proposed in February 1923, in 1925 staff member Robert Guye was in charge of analyzing 30 periodicals that included information about housing, in order to feed a regular 'Chronique de l'habitation' in *Informations Sociales*, one of the journals published and widely circulated by the Office.<sup>31</sup> He also maintained a file of 5000 abstracts

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l'hygiène comme introduction à la politique expérimentale (1875-1925)", *Revue de Synthèse* 115, 3rd series, (1984), pp.313-341.

<sup>30</sup> ILO, W 1000/8/1, von Haan to Director, Meeker and Pribram.

<sup>31</sup> ILO archives, Guye personnel file.

to provide material to his own studies, as well as to answer the information requests that the Office received. The Director never failed to give shavings from the ongoing public discussion about housing in his annual report to the Labour Conference. But it was not enough to demonstrate that public opinion was ripe for the Office to tackle housing issues, it had to ask for it. The most singular attempt in this direction took place in 1922, and provided the rationale for the very first major step of the Office in regard to the housing matter. The “housing” series of the Office archives card index indeed begins with a letter from Signore Vincenzo Magaldi, the president of the executive committee for the International Housing Congress that was scheduled to take place in Rome the next September. Likely after some preliminary talks (and Thomas was in Rome at the time Magaldi wrote his letter), Magaldi got in touch with the Office Italian branch in March 1922. He asked for the Office’s contribution to the preparation of the Congress, underscoring the importance of the “healthy, merry and cheap house” for the workers, and its relevancy for the Office’s mission.<sup>32</sup> This invitation to step into the field was the opportunity to start up the Office study machine, after months of hesitations on how to formulate the Office’s claims to open the

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<sup>32</sup> ILO, W 1000/8/1, Magaldi to Rome branch, 18 March 1922.

housing Pandora box.<sup>33</sup> The news from the postponement of the Rome Congress, at the end of August 1922, while fascist *squadristo* violence reached a peak, did not alter the momentum. The studies were instead given a wider scope, and other tactics were imagined to give legit to the Office's housing ambition. As we have seen, during the 4th session of the International Labour Conference, in November 1922, two Italian delegates presented a resolution project that asked the Office to launch studies about housing. This was no godsend, but the result of a scheme imagined inside the Office a couple of months ago.<sup>34</sup> Office staff member Imre Ferenczi, a figure of municipal housing policies in pre-war Budapest, <sup>35</sup> had received Thomas' green light to publish of an article stressing the Office legitimacy in entering the housing sphere, distribute it to some delegates of the Labour Conference,

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<sup>33</sup> Intra-Office correspondence mentions conversations about housing between the Director and some officers in December 1921. ILO archives, CAT 10-41, Incident Pribram Ferenczi, Ferenczy to Fleury, November 1922.

<sup>34</sup> The story was a bit more complicated, as it involved domestic turf wars about whom among the Office staff was best qualified to supervise the housing studies.

<sup>35</sup> See Susan Zimmermann, *Prächtige Armut: Fürsorge, Kinderschutz und Sozialreform in Budapest; Das 'sozialpolitische Laboratorium' der Doppelmonarchie im Vergleich zu Wien 1873-1914* (Sigmaringen, 1997).

and incite the presentation of a resolution to the latter.<sup>36</sup> The resolution proposed by the Italian delegation had thus been planned, impulsed and vetted by the Office, and it was even corrected by the Conference Selection Committee according to the Office's wish, before being forwarded to the Governing Body.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of the Rome Congress, the Office had made for public opinion to express itself through the voice of some workers' delegates !

*Showcasing experimental knowledge*

At the other end of the rope, the housing studies were also carefully designed to overwhelm the expected roadblocks. Despite Thomas sometimes openly phrased his faith into the belief that housing was to be handled outside of the private market, a position that seems to have been shared by

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<sup>36</sup> Ferenczi's article, "Die Wohnungsfrage und die Internationale Arbeitsorganisation", was published in *Soziale Praxis*, 41, 12 October 1922.

<sup>37</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Conférence Internationale du Travail, compte rendu définitif, IV session Geneve 1922* (Genève 1922), pp. 147 et 490-491 ; ILO, CAT 10-41 'Incident Pribram-Ferenczi', Ferenczi to Fleury, November 1922. It is not unlikely that similar tactics were used in other occasions where workers' delegations presented resolutions that supported the housing activities of the Office.

several staff members involved in the housing studies, they framed their practical work in more neutral terms. Knowledge was the resource to be mobilised. The first studies that were initiated in the Spring of 1922 to fuel a report for the Rome housing congress were designed as a collection of information about the situation in different countries (demand and supply balance, tenants' protection), topped by a general 'compendium report'. In February 1923, taking his cue from the green light given by the Governing Body, Hugo von Haan wrote a note to suggest an expansion of the first studies. The big issue, he wrote, was the choice between government intervention in the field of housing, inline with developments triggered by the war, or the restoration of the primacy of private initiative and market mechanisms. Because this was a contended question, von Haan designed a program that mobilised knowledge to give unimpeachable objective credentials to the Office studies. His scheme was also very close from the "collection and distribution of information" brief that article 396 of the Peace Treaty had given to the Office. Bibliographic analysis; collection of model plans of buildings and neighborhoods; survey of associations, administrations, journals and experts in the field; provision of information to correspondants ; participation to international housing events (congresses, exhibitions); construction of a housing glossary in different languages; housing statistics; publication of up to date articles in the periodicals published by the Office. In other words, all the resources of objective knowledge should be tapped and

harnessed to warrant the Office's housing activities. This was the condition to overcome resistances within the ILO's decision making process, to become the international clearing house in housing matters, and to give to its studies and possible recommendations and conventions to come the lustre of the most informed expertise. From 1923 to 1929, the Office leadership would tap from this range of knowledge based attitudes, according to context. Thomas was prompt to counter the objections of Governing Body members by stressing the fact that, far from taking a stance for a type of housing policy, the Office studies were "comparing methods" across countries, or that they focused on statistical categories. Just like the Office had gathered labour statisticians or migration statisticians to establish that an action was possible in this field, the idea of holding a housing statisticians conference was pushed by Thomas since 1926.<sup>38</sup> As we have seen, this was the flag he

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<sup>38</sup> The postponement was due to the dissenting views of many members of committee. Most comments had to do with the "urban and municipal" bias of Pribram's conclusions. It seems that Pribram was anticipating these difficulties and others (e.g the interpretations of the term 'dwelling', as suggested by ILO, W 1000/2/7, Pribram to Lesoir, 3 August 1928). After the Office thwarted its housing activities, it would not be until 1936 that the Institute would create a commission on the subject. See Bertil Nyström "Observations on the Possibility of Improving the International Comparability of Building and

was carrying when the Governing Body closed the shop in 1929. In this case, then, the resources of objective knowledge had proved insufficient.

### *Interaction with international associations*

In the aforementioned 1923 memo, Hugo von Haan mentioned the possibility to assemble a group of experts to advise the Office about its studies, or to test proof a future possible resolution to be presented to the Labour Conference. This replicated the scheme that had been established for the Office social insurance activities.<sup>39</sup> Here, the arrangement was eventually not realised, as the Office identified a different way to comb and weave knowledge and public opinion resources: the international association. Specialized associations with a membership and activity that stretched across borders could match all the Office's requirements: it could provide a visible

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Housing Statistics” *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 4, (1936), pp. 71-85, and his report “Commission on Building and Housing Statistics. Preliminary Report”, *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute* 6 (1938), pp. 251-263

<sup>39</sup> Sandrine Kott, “Une « communauté épistémique » du social ? Experts de l'OIT et internationalisation des politiques sociales dans l'entre-deux-guerres”, *Genèses*, 71 (2008).

and vocal public opinion to justify the Office's housing forays, a network to collect and distribute information, a platform to herald the Office's achievements, a test tube for its studies and conclusions, and a pool from where experts would be selected to assist the Office in its studies and vet them with the authority of specialised knowledge. The importance of liaising with international associations specialised in housing was established since 1922, but the shape of this liaison changed significantly over the course of years. Three major options were simultaneously or successively activated.<sup>40</sup>

One was capture. This was the main bottom in the initial attempt to establish a connection with the International Housing Congress: beginning with the Rome venue, the scheme was to funnel the Comité Permanent des Congrès de l'Habitation into "collaboration" with the Office. The explicit goal was to legitimize the Office as an effective and well informed protagonist of the housing scene (through its report to the Congress) and to capture the Congress momentum as well as its human resources in order to transfer the

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<sup>40</sup> A detailed narrative is available in Pierre-Yves Saunier, "The ILO as organizer : shaping the transnational housing scene in the 1920s" , paper presented at the conference The ILO: past, present, future, available on line at <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00270557/fr/>

seat of the international housing movement to the Office itself.<sup>41</sup> Such an attempt was made possible because of the existing entanglements between the Office staff and the housing reformers that used to contribute to the Housing Congresses since 1889. Royal Meeker, who first handled the housing file, got in touch with US leaders such as Lawrence Veiller and James Ford for them to come to Geneva and talk with him;<sup>42</sup> Karl Pribram was selected to speak in front of the Congress because of his participation to pre-war sessions;<sup>43</sup> and Imre Ferenczi, another staff member and standing member of the Comité Permanent des Congrès Internationaux de l'Habitation, was to go to Rome to

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<sup>41</sup> ILO, W 1000/8/1, Meeker to Thomas 29 May 1922.

<sup>42</sup> Meeker, a Princeton professor of economics, was appointed as US Commissioner of Labour Statistics by President Wilson. He joined the ILO in 1920 to lead the Scientific Division and left in to become the Pennsylvania secretary of labor and industry. He was a member of the American Association for Labor Legislation

<sup>43</sup> Pribram (1877-1973) had been chief of the Legislative Division for Social Policy in the Austrian Ministry for Social Administration, 1918-21. Before the war, he was general secretary of the Centralstelle für Wohnungsreform, and attended the International Housing conferences as a representative of the Austrian Government. In 1910, he had been the secretary of the organising committee when the congress took place in Vienna.

use his connections to “orient the Congress” towards the Office.<sup>44</sup> In addition to the Italian political situation, the weakness of the Comité Permanent and its inability to overwhelm the divisions caused by the War ultimately forbid the revival of the housing congresses, and their possible capture.

The second type of relationship was cooperation. What strikes me the most is how much this collaboration was instrumental, as far as the Office was concerned. This is clear from the different formal and informal deals that the Office made with the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation, the International Union of Cities or the International Institute of Statistics. Through the Federation, the Office was in search of a network to circulate its own studies and to collect bibliographical material. The existence of the Federation, its interest in housing, was also quite useful as a proof of public opinion interest for housing. Thomas emphasised it several times in his reports, and the Office periodicals published a couple of articles by Federation leaders like Raymond Unwin.<sup>45</sup> With the International Union of Local Authorities, with whom a working agreement was established in 1925 to launch a common investigation in local authorities housing statistics

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<sup>44</sup> ILO archives, W 1000/8/1, note by Gallois, 17 August 1922.

<sup>45</sup> See for example ILO archives, W/9/2/3.

methods,<sup>46</sup> the initial working plan was quickly transformed. Instead of holding workshops and conferences to study common categories for housing statistics, the Office developed its own study, boasted the Union cooperation in front of the Conference and Governing Body, and bluntly used the Union as an endorsement agency from 1926.<sup>47</sup> This was made easier by the fact that the Union was headed by old hands of the European socialist movement, who had rubbed shoulders with Thomas or some staff members like Edgar Milhaud since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a number of political or editorial occasions.<sup>48</sup> It was also in connection with the housing statistics study that the International Institute of Statistics got in the picture, as it was part of the endorsement process imagined in 1926. The plan was to get the Institute

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<sup>46</sup> ILO, S 01/2032/1, Documents, 'Entrevue avec Mr Emile Vinck, Directeur de l'Union International des Villes', memo by Edgard Milhaud.

<sup>47</sup> Idem, Documents, Milhaud to Maurette, 16 April 1926.

<sup>48</sup> See Patrizia Dogliani, "European Municipalism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: the Socialist Network", *Contemporary European History*, 11, 4, 2002, 573-596; Oscar Gaspari, "Cities Against States ? Hopes, Dreams and Shortcomings of the European Municipal Movement 1900-1960", *idem*, 529-548; Renaud Payre and Pierre-Yves Saunier, "L'Internazionale Municipalista : l'Union Internationale des Villes fra 1913 e 1940", *Amministrare*, 30, January-August 2000, 217-242.

endorsement following that of the International Union of Local Authorities: thus the statistical categories elaborated by the Office study would have the support of statistics producers and users as well as of statistical experts. Housing statistics had been placed on the agenda of the 1926 International Institute of Statistics conference, a commission nominated and a reporter chosen. This was initially not expected to be a difficult stage, as the Institute's reporter was no other than Karl Pribram, the Office senior staff member that was directing the housing studies at the Office, and who had elaborated the statistical methods he was to report.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Though, the 1928 discussion was postponed due to dissenting views by many members of the 1927 committee as to the conclusions of Pribram's report. Many comments addressed the 'urban and municipal' bias in Pribram's perspectives. The housing statistics matter was abandoned following the thwart on Office's explorations. Only in 1936 would the Institute create a new commission on the subject. See Bertil Nyström "Observations on the Possibility of Improving the International Comparability of Building and Housing Statistics" *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 4 (1936), pp. 71-85, and "Commission on Building and Housing Statistics. Preliminary Report" *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 6 (1938), pp. 251-263.

The third form was more sophisticated. One of the preliminary statements of the Office housing project was the need for a strong and permanent organisation to develop housing studies, provide expert advice on building techniques and housing policies and create an atmosphere favourable to recommendations to the Conference of Labour. Initially, it was thought that the Office itself would become this agency, possibly through the absorption of the Comité Permanent. This plan was around for quite a while, but the stringencies of the Office budget and the reservations expressed by the Governing Body made it less and less fathomable. Another option progressively emerged from conversations among the officers in charge of housing, as they discovered the situation of the European housing movement. Thanks to political and social connections, mostly within the socialist network, they set the wheels in motion for reorganising the whole scene. Together with leaders of the European municipal movement like Emile Vinck, Florentinus Marinus Wibaut or Henri Sellier,<sup>50</sup> our Geneva cast pulled some ropes through

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<sup>50</sup> In addition to being members and officers of the Comité Permanent des Congrès de l'Habitation, the International Union of Local Authorities or the Federation of Garden Cities and town planning, these three socialists were also leading characters in national and local housing movements and agencies. The Dutch Wibaut was in charge of housing as an alderman of Amsterdam, Vinck was the founder of the Société Nationale d'Habitations à Bon Marché in

numerous meetings, conversations, visits to conferences and invitations to Geneva. Milhaud, Pribram, von Haan, Thomas himself contributed in words and deeds to negotiations and shenanigans that led successively to the merger of the Comité Permanent des Congrès de l'Habitation with the International Federation of Garden Cities and Town planning (1926), then to the establishment of an autonomous housing section within the latter (1927), and eventually to the creation of the International Housing Association, whose headquarters were installed in Frankfurt, Germany, the up and coming Mecca of rationalised public housing. In other words, it was just the kind of partner the Office needed: specialised in housing, headed by old friends, integrating the "defeated" part of Europe and able to capitalize on the latest fashion in housing building techniques. Moreover, reversely to its former avatars, the new association openly supported a policy of public construction and provision of housing. A division of labour was quickly established with such a familiar partner. By and large, the Office would be in charge of the documentation and research tasks, assisted by committees of experts created by the new organization on the most pressing issues (financial and technical problems, organisation of building agencies, legal aspects regarding tenants). The Office would gather the documentation and

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Belgium, and Henri Sellier was the administrator of the Office Départemental des Habitations à Bon Marché de la Seine since 1916.

lead the research, for these committees to deliver an informed decision that would provide the basis for the Office recommendations to the ILO. Such a configuration, concluded its master builder Karl Pribram, would make it possible for the Office “without compromising into a domain still seen at the limit of its prerogatives, to exert not a slight influence on the development of this movement which should play an ever growing role in future social policy”.<sup>51</sup> This was a very innovative way to conceive the interaction with an international association.

### **3. ILO and INGOs: beyond the acronyms**

The Office housing adventure offers an opportunity for historicizing what is often read as a very recent pattern. International relations history has, for quite a while, implicitly considered that intergovernmental organisations had waited for the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, to be entangled into cooperative or competitive ties with International non-governmental organisations.<sup>52</sup> But a growing number of authors are trying to write the history of international organizations as

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<sup>51</sup> ILO, W/1000/5/11, Pribram report, 17 July 1928.

<sup>52</sup> Most handbooks in the field locate the origin of this interaction within the recent “globalisation” moment. See for example William R. Keylor, *A world of nations. The international order since 1945* (Oxford, 2003), epilogue.

organisations whose conduct and agency are not only embedded within inter state relations, but also entangled in a web of interactions with other international organisations.<sup>53</sup>

By a wink of history, another inter-governmental organization, UNESCO, and another Thomas, Jean, are well known for pro active policy towards international non governmental organisations. Jean Thomas, associate director of UNESCO, together with director Julian Huxley, led an active policy to create, support and maintain international non governmental organisations in the orbit of UNESCO in its early years.<sup>54</sup> The creation of the International Theatre Institute, the International Music Council, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the International Council of Museums and a

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<sup>53</sup> Two milestones are Peter Willetts (ed), *The conscience of the world : the influence of non-governmental organisations in the UN system* (Washington, DC, 1996) ; and Akira Iriye, *Global community. The role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world* (Berkeley, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> There are still a number of these groups that are housed in the UNESCO buildings in Paris, and subsidized by it. See Richard Hoggart, “UNESCO and non governmental organizations”, in Peter Willetts (ed), *The conscience of the world : the influence of non-governmental organisations in the UN system* (Washington, DC, 1996). See also Julian Huxley, *Memories*, 2 vols, (London, 1973), 2.

couple of others was the result of the interaction between Huxley, Thomas and the stakeholders in these fields. UNESCO encouraged the establishment of these groups, offered subsidies and maintained a thick working relationship with them. It used their expertise for policy making, their networks to spread its gospel and their presence to nag member governments and balance their pressure on UNESCO operations. There are, in fact many interesting common points between UNESCO and the ILO, beginning with constitutional even if heatedly contested features (the idea that delegations to conferences are chosen among specialists, or that members of delegations do vote as individuals and not as nationals...). But the most salient commonality might be that the first directors of their secretariats wanted to remake the world and saw the institution they had to invent as a touchstone for this endeavour. Both embodied a highly visible and charismatic definition of directorship, epitomized by the intensity of their publishing, speaking and travelling activity. Their conception of the work with groups beyond national governments seems to have been strengthened by this worldview.

The fact that both organisations dealt with a field that was not about high politics (that is relations of status, peace and war between the states), is certainly another clue. The ILO was the less governmental of the inter-governmental organizations created by the Versailles Treaty. Just like many inter-governmental Unions had been shoved into being during the last third of

the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the constant pressure and suggestion of professional, scholars and economic interests groups, the establishment of the ILO was supported beyond governments and diplomatic spheres. In February 1919, the Socialist and trade unionists had gathered in Berne to remind the war aims of labour to the peace makers in Paris.<sup>55</sup> Some participants, like the Frenchmen Albert Thomas and Edgard Milhaud, found their way to leading positions in the Office. National labour delegations to the third commission of the Peace conference, that on international labour legislation, were also vital in shaping the constitution of the International Labour Organization and Office, and trade unionists of various brands from the American Federation of Labour to the French Confédération Générale du Travail contributed to steer

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<sup>55</sup> See Patrizia Dogliani, "Progetto per un Internazionale 'aclassista' : i socialisti nell'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro negli anni venti", *Quaderni della Fondazione Feltrinelli*, 34 (1987), pp. 45-68. The author pushed the study of the relationship between the socialist movement and the second generation of intergovernmental organizations beyond the mere study of intellectual "attitudes" towards the League of Nations or the International Labour Organisation and studied the involvement of socialists within these organisations.

and drive the commission's work.<sup>56</sup> The scholars and administrators who had supported the International Association for Labour Legislation or the International Association on Unemployment also impacted the making of the new institutions: Arthur Fontaine, the French civil servant who acted as the secretary of the Commission on International Labour Legislation in Versailles (and later the president of the Office governing body), was an old hand in both, and many members were included in the national delegations at the first International Labour Conference in Washington in 1919.

The ILO original constitution was broadly shaped by these convergences and pressures, with the well known tripartite constitution that mixed government, employers and workpeople delegates in its different bodies.<sup>57</sup> Another salient feature but less familiar feature is that it might have been in the labour provisions of the Peace Treaty that the notion of “non

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<sup>56</sup> Jasmien van Daele has dissected the operations of the commission in “Engineering social peace: networks, ideas and the founding of the International Labour Organization”, *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), pp. 435-466, while Victor Yves Ghebali, in *L'Organisation Internationale du Travail* (Genève, 1987), underlined the connections of the Office with the Peace conference commission.

<sup>57</sup> Treaty of Peace between the allied and associated powers and Germany, articles 387 sqq.

government” members of intergovernmental organisations appeared for the first time.<sup>58</sup> This terminology, which would expand as a category of its own with UN Charter article 71 about the arrangements between the UN Economic and Social Council and “non governmental organizations”, seems to have been occasionally used in labour reformers circles and ILO early vocabulary. Office staff member Sophy Sanger, former the secretary of the British section for the International Association for Labour legislation, wrote of “non government organizations” to refer to this Association and other groups.<sup>59</sup> Sanger was a member of the Washington Labour Conference secretariat, and one of the first people to be hired at the Office, where she was in charge of the *Legislative series*. The importance of the connection with such groups was important for many other Office staff members who had been associated with their past activity.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Article 389: “The Members undertake to nominate non-government delegates and advisers chosen in agreement with the industrial organisations”.

<sup>59</sup> Sophy Sanger “Practical problems of international labour legislation”, in Solano, *Labour as an international problem*, p.136.

<sup>60</sup> It was also convenient to claim this aegis to “prove” that the ILO and its secretariat were a phase in a longer sequence, e.g Albert Thomas, “The task

The operation of the ILO would confirm such views, in that trade unions, scholarly groups, the cooperative movement and employers' organisations would be very present in all the different stages of its work, including the Office's modus operandi. For Thomas, who had been a socialist, trade union and cooperative leader, this connection seems to have been a central concern, lest the Office would be nothing but a bureaucratic organization. The Office staff, that included many members of labour and labour reform activists groups, and by no means only socialists ones, did share this concern out of political motives and social networks rationales. The breadth of information that circulated between the ILO and trade unions, which can be tracked in the Office's periodicals and in workers' movements periodicals all over the world, is but a tiny clue of this operational propinquity between the Office and "non government organizations". It was by then quite uncommon.

True, the League of Nations also developed an intense communication with voluntary societies in its early years. But it was far from being as much organic. On one hand, international associations were mostly seen as channels

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of the International Labour Office", in Solano, *Labour as an international problem*, p.254.

to spread the gospel about the importance and usefulness of the League;<sup>61</sup> on the other, the League quickly crystallized as an inter-governmental organization geared towards high politics, and this was soon reminded to those in the League who were enthusiast about cooperation with non public and semi public organizations. From 1924, a restrictive application was given to article 24 of the Covenant that could be used to develop such relationship.<sup>62</sup> The Office's own link with the world out there was certainly not deprived of instrumental purposes, as we have seen. But it was about policy and not public relations. The secretariats of the League and of the Office had

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<sup>61</sup> For an exploration of this relationship in two different areas, see Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Sketches from the Urban Internationale. Voluntary societies, international organizations and US Foundations at the city's bedside 1900-1960", *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research*, 25 (2001), pp.380-403 and W. Boyd Rayward, *The Universe of information: the work of Paul Otlet for documentation and international organisation* (Moscow, 1975), chaps 9-11.

<sup>62</sup> on this turn, see Steve Charnowitz, "Two centuries of participation: NGOs and international governance", *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 18 (1996), pp. 183-286, 220 sqq. This view, based on perusal of League Council minutes, is confirmed by archival work on the relationships between the League sections and non-government groups.

in fact a quite different understanding and culture. In fact, League of Nations people sometimes smeared their Office colleagues for the stain of amateurism they saw in the participation of employers' and workers' representatives to their international activities.<sup>63</sup> A few decades later, UNESCO would also be looked upon by professional national foreign offices diplomats, because of its overall purpose as much as in reason of the "amateurish" nature of its staff and delegates.<sup>64</sup> International organisations not connected to high politics seem to be likely to draw much more on resources from international non governmental organisations, both because of their thematic specialised work and because of the propinquity between their staff and the communities that make the worlds they are called upon to regulate, activate or evaluate.

Indeed, it was not only about housing that the Office's officers actively tried to support existing "non government organisations", or even to establish new ones. Thomas and others progressively conceived that keeping in touch with "semi public groups", and building from their commitment and

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<sup>63</sup> An ILO officer would later report the opinion of a League staffer and friend : "In the early days, people in League of Nations circles used, frankly, to regard the International Labor Organization as rather ridiculous", quoted in Charnowitz, "Two centuries", p.219.

<sup>64</sup> Hoggart, "UNESCO and nongovernmental organisations".

buoyancy, was all the more important that their involvement in the fields touched upon by the Office might be useful for the latter's role and range. The groups with whom the Office strived to keep in touch with were to act as the public opinion that would put pressure on the Governing Body and, at a lesser degree, the Conference, for them to release their check on the Office's trailblazing activities. This made it interesting for the Office to be proactive with these groups beyond the housing issue. In 1927, Albert Thomas was a force behind the establishment of the International Social Insurance Conference (Conférence internationale de la mutualité et des assurances sociales -CIMAS), which benefited from the material support of the Office. Adrien Tixier, the head of the Office social insurance section, was also the secretary of the Conference.<sup>65</sup> Before that, Thomas had already been central in the "re-organisation of international political social associations", to quote the name of the relevant archive folder. <sup>66</sup>As a former member or close kin to the International Association for Labour legislation, the International Association on Unemployment and the International Association for Social Insurances, he had worked at their reconstruction since 1920. The Belgian Louis Varlez, the director of the Office unemployment section and former secretary of the International Association on Unemployment, also played a

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<sup>65</sup> I owe this information and supporting material to Sandrine Kott.

<sup>66</sup> ILO archives, G 790. Thanks to Sandrine Kott, again, for pointing that one.

central role in the negotiations. He once clearly stated its reasons to his partner in crime, the French Max Lazard. Private associations, he said, had a role to play at the national level to lobby for standards to be implemented. But they also were useful as an avant garde for propaganda and studies that the Office was not authorized to develop.<sup>67</sup> A couple of weeks later, Varlez was even more direct: “(...) we believe that the political activity of the associations is more necessary than ever, in front of the reactionary character of governments, of the development of stubborn nationalism and because of the necessity to gather the supporters of social reform to prepare for social action and to support the Office, which is currently a bit spaced out”.<sup>68</sup> Thomas, Varlez and others pushed for the merger during several years, and eventually won the day in the Fall of 1924 when the three groups held a common conference in Prague, presided by Thomas. The creation of a new group, the International Association for Social Progress, was proclaimed in 1925.<sup>69</sup> From its headquarters of Basle (in Switzerland), it was expected to support the International Labour Office all the more than several of its leaders

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<sup>67</sup> ILO archives, G 790, Varlez to Lazard, 30 March 1922.

<sup>68</sup> idem, 16 April 1922.

<sup>69</sup> See Martin Fine, “Un instrument pour la réforme. L ‘Association Française pour le Progrès Social 1927-1929”, *Le Mouvement Social*, 94 (1976), pp.3-29.

were very close from the institution (as vice president Louis Varlez, the head of the unemployment section of the Office)<sup>70</sup> or from Thomas himself (such as Adéodat Boissard). The Office had also acted as steward to the International Association for Personnel Work in 1922, with Hugo von Haan in the role of the chaperon.<sup>71</sup> There might be other cases where the Office established this kind of relationships, harnessing the resources of international associations to support the Office operations. The section on “International Relations”, a regular feature of Thomas’ annual report tot he Labour Conference, bears witness of the continuing and intense relationship the Office was anxious to maintain and showcase with civic groups. This section listed a range of voluntary groups connected with “labour and industrial life” and their connections with the Office. It was clearly expected that such leverage on “non government organizations” would help to supersede the hostility, roadblocks and checks on the Office’s thrust towards a better world.

Such high hopes were supported by the variety of networks the Office and his staff were plugged onto. At the other end, the members and leaders of international voluntary associations were eager to get the Office’s support,

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<sup>70</sup> On Varlez’s role , see Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur* (Paris, 1994) and Jasmien Van Daele, *Van Gent tot Genève. Louis Varlez. Een biografie* (Gent, 2002).

<sup>71</sup> ILO archives, W 1/2.

both for material or status expectations. It does not mean that they were not afraid of a possible vassalization, and Thomas alluded to it when he told the International Labour Conference of 1925 about the 1924 Prague Social Policy Conference and the “suspicion” of people there. But the existence of common horizons, namely the belief into class collaboration for the sake of a pacified society and the welfare of the workers, together with the memory of past shared experiences and fights (in political groups and issue networks) were enough to allow the Office under Thomas’ leadership to act as an important organizer of international non governmental life during the inter war. This important legacy can only be observed through such blatant failures as the attempt to develop a housing policy for the ILO.