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Philippe Rygiel

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How Many Leave Europe and Why Do They? The Birth of Statistics on Global Migration. Brussels 1853. Journal of Migration History, 10 (2024), 202-222

Philippe Rygiel, Ens de Lyon, Larha CNRS

Abstract

The historical study of the production of statistical knowledge concerning global migration has garnered little attention among historians. This is striking in light of the broader and richly explored domains of global migration regulation, knowledge production, and the history of sciences, including statistics. The marginalisation of this area in historical discourse is noteworthy, considering the pivotal role that statistical knowledge plays in understanding and managing migration. An examination of this topic unveils the interplay between migration policy, statistical methodologies and the contexts in which they were collected. Statistical data bears the mark of the context of its creation and incorporates the peculiarities related to the state of administrative technologies and the resources of the states that collected it. Such data also shows the imprint of social representation, that make it difficult to distinguish the ‘other’, the foreigner, the alien and the migrant, as well as the political agendas that justify the establishment of such a costly means of knowledge.

Keywords

statistics – migration management – social representation – statistical bureaus

The historical study of the production of statistical knowledge concerning global migration, an ancient practice, has surprisingly garnered scant

attention among historians. This oversight, despite a score of scholarly articles on the topic,¹ is striking especially in light of the broader and richly explored domains of global migration regulation,² knowledge production, and the history of sciences, including statistics,³ emphasising its deeply political nature and historical character. The marginalisation of this area in historical discourse is noteworthy, considering the pivotal role that statistical knowledge plays in understanding and managing migration patterns over time. A comprehensive examination of this topic could unveil the intricate interplay between migra-

tion policy, statistical methodologies, and historical contexts. This area of study, bridging historical inquiry and statistical analysis, offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary research, promising insights not only into the mechanics of migration, but also into the epistemological underpinnings of how we comprehend and manage human mobility in a global context. I consider, following Adam McKeown, that statistical production informs both the view of contemporaries and that of historians. McKeown points to the underestimation of migration outside the transatlantic system by early statistics. For example, because only forced migration was counted, analysts and scholars considered that Asian migrants had little agency and could not be understood using the same explanatory system. This manifestation of race bias lead McKeown to write that we cannot understand ‘... migration without simultaneously understanding the social processes by which [migrant statistics] have been produced, recorded and [migrants] processed as “refugees”, “guest laborers”, or “illegal aliens”’.⁴

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- 1 Ahmad Wali Ahmad-Yar and Tuba Bircan, ‘Anatomy of a misfit: international migration statistics’, *Sustainability* 13:7 (2021) 4032–4054, 4032; Dzovinar Kévonian, ‘La légitimation par l’expertise: le Bureau international du travail et la statistique internationale’, *Les Cahiers Irice* 2 (2008) 81–106; Ellen Percy Kraly and K.S. Gnanasekaran, ‘Efforts to improve international migration statistics: a historical perspective’, *International Migration Review* 2:4 (1987) 967–995; Heinz Fassmann, ‘European migration: historical overview and statistical problems’, in: Heinz Fassmann, Ursula Reeger, Wiebke Sievers (eds), *Statistics and reality. Concepts and measurements of migration in Europe* (Amsterdam 2009) 21–44.
 - 2 T. Alexander Aleinikoff, ‘Toward a global system of human mobility: three thoughts’, *American Journal of International Law* 111 (2017) 24–28; Beate Althammer, ‘“Welfare does not know any border”: negotiations on the transnational assistance of migrants before the World Wars’, *Journal of Migration History* 6:3 (2020) 352–378; Alison Bashford, ‘Nation, empire, globe: the spaces of population debate in the interwar years’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49:1 (2007) 170–201; Philippe Rygiel, *L’ordre des circulations? L’Institut de droit international et la régulation des migrations (1870–1920)* (Paris 2021).
 - 3 Lawrence Goldman, *Victorians and numbers: statistics and society in nineteenth century Britain* (Oxford 2022); Alain Desrosières, *Gouverner par les nombres: l’argument statistique ii* (Paris 2013); Anne Rasmussen, ‘Jalons pour une histoire des congrès internationaux au xix e siècle: régulation scientifique et propagande intellectuelle’, *Relations Internationales* 62 (1990) 115–133.
 - 4 A. McKeown, ‘Global migration, 1846–1940’, *Journal of World History* 15 (2004) 155–189, 185.

Considering the current paucity of comprehensive knowledge in this field, coupled with my own recent interest in the subject, I present here a series of preliminary observations and a multitude of possible lines of inquiries, rather than definitive conclusions.

In order to do so, it is imperative to delineate and confine my subject matter. My inquiry is specifically centred on the production of statistical knowledge within what was referred to in the nineteenth century as the ‘international society’ – a concept of somewhat indistinct boundaries – and within international institutions during the twentieth century. I aim first to reconstruct a chronology, a history of these entities, encompassing their key players, the practices they implemented, and, if feasible, the uses of them by stakeholders in the field of migration management. This effort is inspired by observations made in other fields, hinting at potential interconnections between what might be termed the ‘doctrinal production of knowledge’ on international migration, and the initiatives for its regulation and control.⁵ It is supported by the examination of those first international meetings that had the regulation of global migrations on their agenda. These gatherings are noteworthy for the considerable time and effort dedicated by the participants to discussing optimal strategies for accumulating knowledge about migration phenomena, with a specific emphasis on statistical data. This can be seen from the minutes of the first international meetings on the regulation of migration. Participants at the first international congress on migration, held in Paris in 1889, devoted a significant part of their discussions to examining the usefulness of statistics.⁶

The corpus of materials available for this investigation is not only substantial but indeed verges on being overwhelmingly copious. While international migration has often been described as one of the last bastions of uncontested sovereignty,⁷ it has been de facto subject to international regulation since the mid-nineteenth century, and is considered by some actors in international society as a matter worthy of interest and susceptible to governance or regulation.⁸ As a consequence, the topic of international migration has been a

5 Paul-André Rosental, ‘Géopolitique et État-providence. Le brit et la politique mondiale des migrations dans l’entre-deux-guerres’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 61 (2006) 99–134.

6 *Congrès international de l’intervention des pouvoirs publics dans l’émigration et l’immigration: tenu à Paris les 12, 13 et 14 août 1889* (np 1890).

7 Catherine Dauvergne, ‘Migration and the rule of law in global times’, *The Modern Law Review* 67:4 (2004) 588–615.

8 Rygiel Philippe, ‘Does international law matter? The Institut de Droit International and the regulation of migrations before the First World War’, *Journal of Migration History* 1:1 (2015) 7–31.

focal point of discussion and analysis in numerous high-profile international forums dedicated to political and social engineering.

In undertaking the task of tracing the nuances of a history that spans nearly two centuries and is marked by considerable complexity, I recognise the impracticality of capturing every detail within the confines of a few pages. Consequently, I have elected to focus on a handful of pivotal moments. I identify an inaugural moment of significance: Brussels, 1853, the one I will focus on in this article. It was here that the first international congress of statistics convened, orchestrated by Adolphe Quételet (figure 1),⁹ who was at that time the director of the newly established Belgian Statistical Office. This event marks a foundational chapter in the history of statistical approaches to migration, setting the stage for subsequent developments in the field.

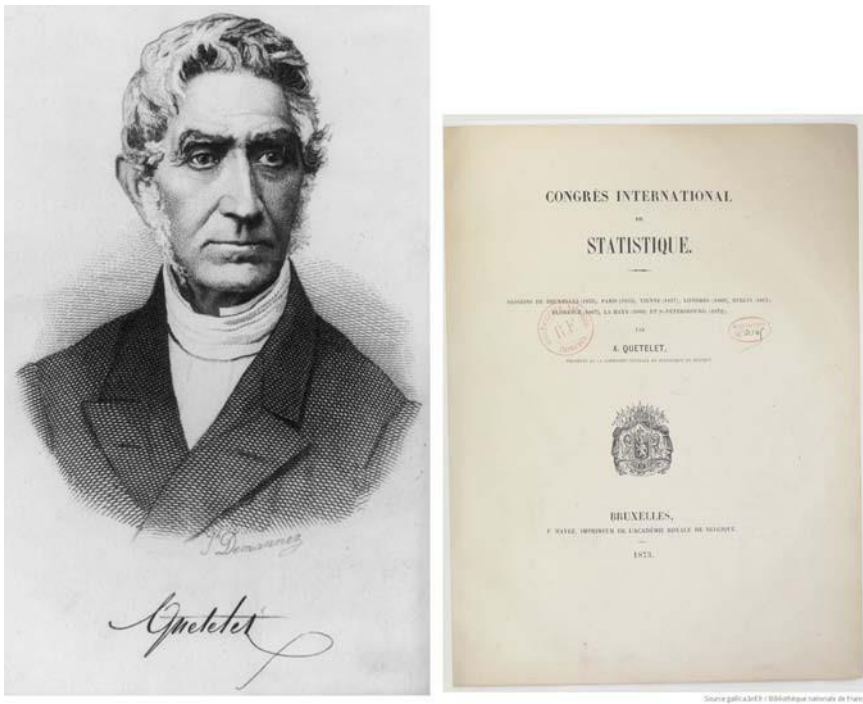


FIGURE 1 Portrait of Belgian astronomer, mathematician, statistician and sociologist Adolphe Quételet (1796–1874) by Joseph-Arnold Demannez (1825–1902). Steel engraving. Illustration from *Annuaire de l'Académie royale de Belgique* vol 41 (Brussels 1875) 108 and the cover of the 1873 report on the International statistics conference. Source Gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France/

⁹ Kevin Donnelly, *Adolphe Quetelet, social physics and the average men of science, 1796–1874* (Pittsburgh 2015).

The primary sources for this investigation predominantly comprise yearbooks, publications from statistical institutions, and works authored by some of their members. Approaching these materials, I pose several initial, exploratory questions. My aim is to identify the key actors involved, elucidate the workings of their networks, and understand how they define the phenomena requiring documentation. Furthermore, I intend to examine the techniques and methods at their disposal.¹⁰

Adolphe Quételet, originally trained as a mathematician and astronomer, was a pioneering figure in the application of mathematical tools to social statistics. His work gained pre-eminence in Europe during his time, not only due to the significance of his contributions but also because of the prestigious positions he had previously held in the scientific community. Quételet served as the director of the Belgian Academy of Sciences and the Brussels Observatory, roles that conferred upon him considerable esteem. Additionally, his institutional standing as the head of what was then one of Europe's most modern national statistical institutions, further solidified his influence.

Governing by Numbers?

The establishment and evolution of this institution can be contextualised within a broader European, and indeed Western, historical narrative, characterised by the advancement of science, the growth of the industrial sector, and the upheavals of revolts and revolutions marking the first half of the nineteenth century. In this era of transformation, statistical offices emerged in most European capitals. These institutions were conceived with the objective of governing these evolving societies through science, which slowly but increasingly came to be interpreted as governance helped by numerical data and statistical analysis. This movement reflected a paradigm shift in the management and understanding of social phenomena, wherein, what we would today call numbers and data began to play a critical role in shaping policies and public discourse.

The institutionalisation of statistics as a discipline in Europe is exemplified by the founding of key organisations in the early nineteenth century. The General Statistics of France was established in 1833,¹¹ followed closely by

¹⁰ Eric Brian, 'Bibliographie des comptes rendus officiels du congrès international de statistique (1853–1878)', *Annales de démographie historique* (1990) 469–479.

¹¹ Alain Desrosières, Jacques Mairesse and Michel Volle, 'Les temps forts de l'histoire de la statistique française', *Économie et Statistique* 83:1 (1976) 19–28.

the Royal Statistical Society of London in 1834.¹² These foundations mark significant milestones in the evolution of statistical science and its growing influence on public administration and policy.

The pioneers of this nascent science were often civil servants who aspired for a degree of autonomy, both from political powers and existing scientific institutions. This desire for independence was driven by a keen interest in establishing and maintaining credibility in their field. They were also acutely aware of the potential benefits of achieving international recognition, understanding that such acclaim could be leveraged to enhance their standing and influence within national contexts.

Furthermore, there was a confluence of interests with central administrations, which were eager to refine the tools at their disposal. These administrations recognised the value of participating in international statistical congresses, not only for the practical benefits of technological and methodological transfers, but also for the prestige such involvement conferred.¹³ This period saw a burgeoning of international collaboration in the field of statistics,¹⁴ spurred on by mutual interests in advancing the science and its applications for more effective governance.

These dynamics are not specific to statistics, we find them at work in several scientific fields presiding over the birth of the first international scientific organisations;¹⁵ they are, however, particularly precocious in this field, which the reading of the minutes of the debates in Brussels reveals. Opening the session, Quételet's speech defined statistics as a science in its infancy, a common good for all mankind and a necessary tool in the context of changing societies. Insisting on the necessity of the congress he says: 'It is also a question of putting observers from different countries in a benevolent relationship, proposing uniform methods to simplify their work and make the

12 Ian David Hill, 'Statistical Society of London—Royal Statistical Society the first 100 years: 1834–1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society* 147:2 (1984) 130–139.

13 Éric Brian, 'Transactions statistiques au XIXe siècle', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 145:5 (2002) 34–46.

14 Alain Desrosières, 'Chapitre 5. Une brève histoire de la professionnalisation internationale des statisticiens', in: Alain Desrosières, *Prouver et gouverner. Une analyse politique des statistiques publiques. Series Sciences Humaines* (2014) 95–110; Nico Randeraad, 'The International Statistical Congress (1853–1876): knowledge transfers and their limits', *European History Quarterly* 41:1 (Paris 2011) 50–65.

15 Rasmussen, 'Jalons pour une histoire des congrès internationaux au XIXe siècle'; Johan Heilbron, Nicolas Guilhot and Laurent Jeanpierre, 'Vers une histoire transnationale des sciences sociales', *Sociétés Contemporaines* 1 (2009) 121–145.

results comparable'.¹⁶ This will make it easier to 'study [...] the fluctuations in modern societies, as well as their currents and their pitfalls',¹⁷ and thus to guide them better, because 'It is only after studying the wounds carefully that we can find suitable remedies'.¹⁸ These metaphors turn the statistician into a strange creature, a medical scientist called upon to provide a tool to guide societies along the perilous path of modernity, or rather to offer those in power the tools to avoid the abyss. It is the governments that need to be interested in the cause and whose support is actively sought.

While this language may seem dated to us, shortly after the brutal revolutionary outbreak in nineteenth-century Europe it was perfectly intelligible in its context and likely to find favour with the liberal elites of Europe, who shared a solid faith in science, the conviction that societies could be reformed according to reason, and a deep-seated fear of possible popular revolutions.¹⁹

We encounter, moreover, not only attending the first congresses but also participating, representatives of the European elites concerned with science-guided reforms, active in other fields, who neither have scientific training nor a penchant for the calculability of societies, demonstrating that in these foundational years, despite the overshadowing figure of Quételet and his efforts, statistics is still very much close to a general science of the state that is not at all confused with an enterprise of measuring human societies.

Tobias Asser, one of the founders of the Institute of International Law²⁰ and also a member of the Association for the Advancement of Social Sciences, actively participates in the sessions in Vienna in 1857 and The Hague in 1869,

¹⁶ 'On sait, d'une part, que le moyen le plus sûr de faire progresser les sciences, c'est d'en perfectionner le langage et d'adopter des notations uniformes qui permettent de résumer plus facilement un grand nombre d'idées, et de rapprocher des faits pour en saisir les rapports et les lois': *Compte rendu des travaux du congrès général de statistique réuni à Bruxelles les 19, 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1853* (Brussels 1853) 23.

¹⁷ *Compte rendu*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Christian Müller, 'The politics of expertise: the Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales, democratic peace movements and international law networks in Europe, 1850–1875', in: Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck and Jakob Vogel (eds), *Shaping the transnational sphere. Experts, networks and issues from the 1930s to the 1940s* (New York 2011) 131–151.

²⁰ Arthur Eyffinger, 'Biography tmc Asser', in: Arthur Eyffinger, *tmc Asser (1838–1913) (2 vols.)* (Leiden 2019) 1836; Philippe Rygiel, 'Les fondateurs de l'institut de droit international et la mondialisation juridique', in: François Chaubet (ed.), *Faire l'histoire culturelle de la mondialisation* (Nanterre 2018) 1–19.

within the framework of the section dedicated to judicial statistics. He argues for the recognition in national legislation of a number of provisions regarding judicial assistance to foreigners, for example, saying that statistics have

... the purpose of revealing the political, social, administrative, moral, individual situation of a country at a given moment. Viewed from this perspective, statistics can be divided into descriptive statistics and mathematical or arithmetic statistics, which uses numbers; knowing a country's legislation is indeed one of the first facts that is important to ascertain when one wants to understand the social or political state of a country.²¹

The organisational structure of these congresses was deliberately aligned with their overarching objectives: to enlighten public opinion, secure governmental support, and facilitate the cross-border exchange of information and expertise among specialists. These events were characterised by their inclusive nature, openly welcoming all 'friends of science' – essentially anyone with an interest – thereby democratising access to the advancements and benefits of this emerging scientific field. However, the core of serious deliberative work was undertaken in smaller, focused sessions, where experts representing their respective national statistical services engaged in detailed discussions and exchanges.

The attendance patterns of these congresses, held from 1853 in Brussels to 1876 in Budapest, offer a revealing insight into their operational dynamics. Over the course of these nine international gatherings, a total of 4,470 individuals participated. Among these attendees, 390 were present at more than one congress, but only 30 attended five or more sessions. This select group primarily comprised directors of national statistical offices, underscoring the specialised nature of these meetings and the pivotal role these leaders played in shaping the field of statistics during this period.²²

The initial phase of these international statistical networks was marked by a unique coexistence of curious amateurs and seasoned professionals. However, this blend began to dissolve due to a confluence of factors. The antagonisms stemming from the Franco-Prussian War, the passing of the

21 Congrès international de statistique, *Congrès international de statistique à la Haye, septième session, du 6 au 11 septembre 1869* (The Hague, n.d.) 173.

22 Eric Brian, 'Transactions statistiques au XIXe siècle', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 145 (2002) 34–46.

founding generation, and a growing preference among professionals for utilising congress time for specialist exchanges rather than public outreach, significantly altered the congresses' dynamics.²³ Moreover, as the field of statistics became more institutionalised, the need for popularisation efforts diminished. These combined influences led these congresses to end: the last meeting was held in Budapest in 1876.

Measuring Migrations or Studying European Emigration?

The objective of the founders of the international congresses of statistics was ambitious. As Engel wrote to Quételet in 1861, it is about establishing a 'European central commission of statistics'²⁴ that would provide governments with the knowledge necessary for the proper conduct of societies. This presupposes, as suggested by the agenda of the first session held in Brussels in 1853, the measurement of migrations affecting states. Long before we could think of a 'migration state',²⁵ measuring migrations appeared indispensable to these senior officials.

The circular dated 20 May 1853, detailing the agenda for the inaugural congress, delineates the areas of interest. These were categorised into three sections, with the first section encompassing four distinct topics, including emigration and immigration.²⁶ Congress participants were invited to express their views on the relevance of gathering information that goes far beyond what is necessary for mere counting. Below, we offer a translation of the programme proposed to the congress members.²⁷

23 François-Xavier von Neumann-Spallart, 'La fondation de l'Institut international de statistique, aperçu historique', *Bulletin de l'Institut international de statistique* 1:1 (1886) 1: 'Among the shortcomings of the congress, we should mention first of all the invasion of the lay or uninitiated element, which had been welcomed at the beginning because it helped to spread interest in statistics, but which soon became a real useless ballast, having been attracted by motives that had nothing in common with the serious idea of scientific and official statistics'. My translation.

24 Quoted in Armand Julin, 'La correspondance scientifique de Ernst Engel avec Adolphe Quételet (1852–1872)', *Journal de la Société de Statistique de Paris* 80 (1939) 215–21, 219.

25 James F. Hollifield, 'The emerging migration state 1', *International Migration Review* 38:3 (2004) 885–912.

26 A. Quételet, *Congrès international de statistique. Sessions de Bruxelles (1855), Paris (1855), Vienne (1857), Londres (1860), Berlin (1865), Florence (1867), La Haye (1869) et S-Petersbourg (1872)* (Brussels 1873) 5.

27 The original document (in French) is accessible at: Congrès général de statistique, *Compte rendu des travaux du congrès général de statistique réuni à Bruxelles les 19, 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1853* (Brussels 1853) 128.

EMIGRATIONS CONSIDERED FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE ORIGIN, NUMBER AND CONDITION OF THE EMIGRANTS, WITH AN INDICATION OF THE PLACES OF EMBARKATION AND DESTINATION. – CAUSES AND RESULTS. – MODE OF COLLECTING INFORMATION.

* Emigrations take place under the influence of various causes, political, religious or social. Nowadays, causes of the latter nature have the greatest influence on emigration: the hope of increasing one's well-being determines the worker to abandon his homeland and settle in another country to improve his situation. It is therefore necessary to consider emigration from the point of view of the influence it may exert on the public fortune of the mother country, and to specify the nature of the information to be gathered in order to ascertain its effects.

* In order to achieve this aim, an emigration register would be kept in which the inhabitants who leave the homeland to settle in a foreign country would be entered. The information to be requested on each emigrant would include

- * 1. Surname and first names
- * 2. Place and date of birth.
- * 3. Sex, age and marital status.
- * 4. Religion.
- * 5. Occupation.
- * 6. Approximate assessment of resources or capital available.
- * 7. The day of departure from the commune.
- * 8. The name of the country where he will settle.
- * 9. The port of embarkation.
- * 10. The port of disembarkation.
- * 11. The known or probable general causes of emigration.

* In the case of a whole family, consisting of children and young people under 21 years of age, who have no personal fortune, it will be sufficient to mention, opposite the father's name, the amount of his resources or capital which he may have at his disposal for the establishment of the family, together with the information relating to the causes of emigration.

* In this case, the entry shall begin with the name of the father, followed by that of the mother, if applicable, and the first names of the children in the order of their birth; persons who are members of the family or household shall be entered after the children, mentioning their degree of relationship.

* Individuals who emigrate clandestinely would be registered automatically with all the information that public knowledge can provide.

* With the help of this information, collected uniformly in all countries, numerical records will be established.

The statistics desired by the members of the congress organising committee, however, have little in common with what we understand today as a description of migratory flows. Several elements of the resolutions adopted and the debates in the congresses show this, and allow for a clarification of the contours of the phenomena targeted by the attendees.

This text of the programme depicts a male worker, possibly accompanied by a woman and children, where an economic calculation leads him to head towards a port, to abandon his homeland without any intention of returning. As a free worker, he is a rational economic agent whose mobility is framed within a liberal world. On this last point, the British delegate, commenting a few years later on the data related to emigration from Ireland, is quite explicit, considering that even though ‘individuals lack the means to emigrate’, it is not possible to fund these departures because ‘free transport at public expense would have been a violation of principle’.²⁸ This amounts to defining as the only migratory movement that is to be measured, the transoceanic displacements that carry an increasing number of men and families away from Europe.

Several reasons explain this; some are of a practical nature. These statisticians, keen to grasp the dynamics of population movements, recognise the impossibility of compiling accurate mortality tables essential for insurance, unless migrations are factored in. This happened at a time when the most significant migratory movements impacting European states were transatlantic emigrations. This point would be the subject of lengthy debates during the 1869 meeting, since, to use the words of one of the speakers, ‘the great difficulty we all know comes from immigrations and emigrations that distort the relationship between the deceased of a certain age and the births that contribute to these deaths’.²⁹ This makes it impossible, according to the Bavarian envoy during the same session, to establish survival and mortality tables at state level.

The issue was also a matter of contemporary relevance, as well as an object of scientific curiosity. It sparked numerous publications in the mid-century, some authored by scholars who would become key figures in the congress.³⁰

28 Pierre Maestri, *Compte rendu général des travaux du congrès international de statistique dans les sessions de Bruxelles, 1853, Paris 1855, Vienne 1857, Londres 1869 et Berlin 1863* (Florence 1866) 280.

29 Congrès international de statistique, *Congrès international de statistique à la Haye, septième session, du 6 au 11 septembre 1869. Première partie programme* (The Hague n.d.) 94.

30 Wilhelm Dieterici, *Über Auswanderungen und Einwanderungen: letztere in besonderer Beziehung auf den preußischen Staat: vom statistischen Standpunkte: eine am 9. Januar 1847 im wissenschaftlichen Verein zu Berlin gehaltene Vorlesung* (Berlin 1847); Charles Lavallée, ‘De l’émigration européenne’, *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1852) 92–103; Alfred Legoyt, *L’émigration européenne son importance, ses causes, ses effets: avec un appendice*

Among these were Legoyt,³¹ who would be the central figure in French statistical administration for several decades, and his Prussian counterpart, Dieterici.³² Studied and debated the question of emigration appears still new, and to some still poorly understood, and misunderstood, a point noted by several participants in the 1853 debates, notably Henri Say who urges caution because ‘The question of emigration is entirely new’.³³

Related to statistical methodology and an object of scientific curiosity, migration finally emerges as a political issue, inevitably drawing the attention of the state scholars gathered in Brussels. However, the implications of this matter significantly diverge from those we are familiar with today. This interest in migration stems from the massive levels of emigration affecting certain regions of Europe, which, by 1853, sparked widespread concern, as evidenced by the majority opinion in the terms of the resolution adopted that year. This was that the affected states might lose their substance, and be deprived not only of men but also of the capital these individuals take with them. This fear, traditionally articulated by proponents of mercantilism, something still vigorous in mid-nineteenth century Europe,³⁴ inspired and shaped the questionnaire proposed to the assembly, whose authors were wholly preoccupied with the causes and impact on the public wealth of the motherland.

The programme defined in Brussels, which primarily consisted of counting European emigrants boarding ships leaving Europe – a task believed at the time to be possible – would, despite the agreement on the significance of the issue, only be implemented very imperfectly.

Still a Difficult Task?

In 1872, during one of the last congresses, the Swedish delegate stated that although data on emigration now exists, it is still impossible to have

sur l’émigration africaine, Hindoue et chinoise (Paris 1861); A. Legoyt, ‘Des conséquences de l’émigration au point de vue de l’acclimatement (suite et fin)’, *Journal de la Société de Statistique de Paris* 6 (1865) 93–105.

31 René Le Mée, ‘La statistique démographique officielle de 1815 à 1870 en France’, *Annales de Démographie Historique. Société de Démographie Historique* (1979) 251–279.

32 Jean-Pierre Beaud, ‘Un débat entre statisticiens du XIX e siècle: comment obtenir la nécessaire collaboration de la population à l’exercice du recensement?’, *Histoire & Mesure* 2 (2022) 125–150.

33 Congrès général de statistique, *Compte rendu des travaux du congrès général de statistique réuni à Bruxelles les 19, 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1853* (Brussels 1853) 132.

34 Philippe Rygiel, *Le temps des migrations blanches. Migrer en Occident du milieu du XIXe siècle au milieu du XXe siècle*. (Paris 2007) chapter 2.

information on the economic resources of migrants and their individual reasons for departure, because official statistics derive their information from emigrant registers kept by the clergy, which do not require investigations of this nature.³⁵ The delegates also agreed to accept that, currently, not all European states have reliable emigration statistics yet. However, the study of transcontinental migrations, the subject of vigorous debates in Brussels, seems to arouse less interest in 1872, or fewer debates at least, even though numerous questions remained unanswered, not least whether every passenger on a ship leaving Europe for America should be counted as an emigrant.

Circumstantial reasons partially explain this. The agenda presented at the congress is partly determined by its location, with the local statistical service contributing significantly to defining the questions that will be central to the congress, which reflect their own national agenda. For example, in Vienna in 1857, there was extensive debate on ethnographic statistics and the necessity in counting the representatives of the various groups and races within the same state; in London in 1860, there was a concern for colonial statistics; part of the discussions concerned the question of migrations to colonial possessions, which are often particularly difficult to measure.

Indeed, the study of migrations, particularly transoceanic migrations, did not hold the same importance for everyone. This difference in agenda, within a circle where progress was only possible through consensus, was not without its effects. The most evident manifestation of these discrepancies between national agendas is provided by Baron Charles Dupin,³⁶ an economist and brilliant mathematician, and also a politician, who played a central role in Paris in 1855.

In his report on the congress programme, presented at its opening, he immediately asserts that ‘Anything that is not of positive and tangible utility to man is not statistics’,³⁷ before suggesting to narrow the scope of the congress’s work to only those questions that are of interest to all, because

The framework of statistics must be more circumscribed, and the perspectives from which the science should position itself must become

³⁵ Congrès international de statistiques, *Compte rendu de la huitième session à Saint-Petersbourg*, vol. 3 (Saint Petersburg 1872) 162.

³⁶ Christian Bozon, ‘Colloque Charles Dupin 25 et 26 octobre 2007 (organisé par les Universités de Paris VII-Denis Diderot et Paris X-Nanterre)’, *Bulletin de la Sabix. Société des Amis de la Bibliothèque et de l’Histoire de l’École Polytechnique* 42 (2008) 21–25.

³⁷ Alfred Legoyt, *Compte rendu de la deuxième session du congrès international de statistique, réuni à Paris les 10, 12, 13, 14 et 15 septembre 1855* (Paris 1856) 15.

even fewer when it comes to defining the limits of the observations proposed to be made on bases common to entire nations, several nations, to all nations.³⁸

This implies, according to him, that one should be satisfied with a minimal programme for recording migrations, which for France would consist of simply noting ‘the number, the sex, the age of emigrants, and the foreign port to which they are directed’ – essentially a statistic of embarkations – and not to reopen the debates of Brussels, pointedly remarking to an English delegate wishing to address the study of emigrations, that the Brussels congress had already dealt with the issue and had addressed it.³⁹

Indeed, he considers this issue not of interest for, on this ‘... studies belong to the prudence, to the wisdom of each government; they are foreign to the International Congress’. Indeed, it does not affect all states and could not, in the case of France, justify the establishment of a mechanism designed to collect the necessary information, particularly from population registers recording departures, because

It must also be admitted that the maintenance of such a register would be impossible for administrative considerations, or would be partly unnecessary because the country would not have, or would have few, emigrants. In this case, the country in question should obviously limit itself to noting the number of foreign emigrants who use its territory or its ports to reach their destination. This situation seems to be notably that of France.

Pragmatism and concern for public funds come together here for someone who was the minister of marine and colonies, but also the brilliant mathematician to whom we owe Dupin’s cyclides, and who was president of the Academy of Sciences. He also points out the vagueness of the notions then used, and the inadequacy of measurement tools which makes measurement difficult, which makes him doubt the possibility of establishing a count of emigrants, as they were defined at the time:

Emigrations can scarcely be observed except in ports and at the time of embarkation; they often leave great uncertainty. Many individuals leave their country as travellers with the sincere intention of returning; later,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 443.

they develop interests or form ties that keep them forever. Some emigrate with the thought of returning abroad, which unfortunately vanishes because their hopes were disappointed, or because they achieved the fortune they wished to acquire. It is useful for France to record the number, sex, age of emigrants, and the foreign port to which they are directed. It must distinguish between the emigration of French citizens and transmigration, that is, the departures of foreigners who cross our territory to go emigrate elsewhere.⁴⁰

Dupin highlights difficulties well known to specialists in migration studies, which have long served as commonplaces. The movement of individuals is complex and rarely boils down to a simple journey from point A to point B, making them hard to count and harder to map.⁴¹ Indeed, a significant portion of transoceanic migrants embark from ports that have focussed on turning these departures into a lucrative specialty, requiring them to cross borders to reach these ports.⁴² The former French Minister of Marine thus had every reason to know that thousands of men and women from all over Europe embark from the port of Le Havre.⁴³ Furthermore, every movement is accompanied by comings and goings and returns, which we now know to be far more significant in the case of transatlantic migrations than contemporaries believed.⁴⁴ Therefore, defining an emigrant as someone who permanently leaves Europe – a conception defended by some participants at the conference⁴⁵ – can only raise multiple difficulties and make counting uncertain.

Other difficulties, which Dupin does not highlight, are evident to us today. The categories of emigrant, immigrant and foreigner are still very vague, and attempts at clarification by some did not achieve consensus at the conference. An English participant in 1855, for example, wishes for a clarification on how

40 Ibid., 26.

41 Mathilde Costil and Francesca Fattori, 'Cartographier les migrations dans un grand quotidien', *Hérodote* 174:3 (2019) 225–232.

42 Markian Prokopovych and Torsten Feys, 'Transience, overseas migration and the modern European city. Introduction to the special issue 'Cities and overseas migration in the long nineteenth century'', *Journal of Migration History* 2:2 (2016) 209–222.

43 John Barzman and Éric Saunier (eds), *Migrants dans une ville portuaire: Le Havre (xvie-xxie siècle)*, *Migrants dans une ville portuaire: Le Havre (xvie-xxie siècle)* (Mont-Saint-Aignan 2005).

44 Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan and Katherine Eriksson, 'To the new world and back again: return migrants in the age of mass migration', *iLR Review* 72:2 (2019) 300–322.

45 M. de Baumhauer, head of the Dutch statistical office, letter to the congress, 7 April 1855 in: Alfred Legoyt (ed.), *Compte rendu de la deuxième session du congrès international de statistique, réuni à Paris les 10,12,13, 14 et 15 septembre 1855* (Paris 1856) 26.

Jews should be considered, who, in his view, wherever they are, can only be seen as emigrants:

It should not be forgotten that in various parts of the world there are large numbers of Israelites. And well! Except for France, which has been great and generous enough to admit them into its bosom and to merge them civilly into its population, all other countries regard them as emigrants. I think it would be very important to confuse the Israelites in the migration statistics.⁴⁶

The point of interest here is not the expression of antisemitism, which was commonplace among the British and European elites of the time,⁴⁷ but rather the difficulty this intervention highlights in distinguishing and articulating the language of otherness and race, and of citizenship and migration, as evidenced by other debates.

It is striking to note that in the French versions of the reports, the very word *étranger* was used, throughout the period, to designate an inhabitant of a locality who was not born there, the *horsain* or the stranger, and not just someone who does not hold citizenship of the state that counts him or her. In 1876, the report on urban statistics adopted in Budapest, specified that the costs incurred for ‘the care of foreign sick persons, whose expenses should be reimbursed by their respective municipalities’ must be covered. Here, we merely rediscover the scholarly and statistical echo of the slow development of the political and legal categories of the ‘foreigner’, which, as we know from the pioneering work of Gérard Noiriel in France,⁴⁸ remained very fluid and uncertain until the 1880s.

To these conceptual difficulties were added numerous practical challenges, particularly when it came to implementing the 1853 programme in its entirety, which some contemporaries highlight, concluding that it is impossible to successfully carry out the initial programme in the terms in which it was conceived.

The rapporteur of the commission himself, Gachard, based on a proposal from another Belgian representative, Bourson, suggests that the commission abandon the attempt to determine ‘the known or probable reason for emigration’, considering that the information is ‘too difficult to obtain’.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 443.

⁴⁷ Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman, ‘Introduction: liberalism and anti-semitism’, *Jewish Culture and History* 6:1 (2003) 1–26.

⁴⁸ Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français: histoire de l’immigration XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris 1988).

⁴⁹ Congrès général de statistique, *Compte rendu des travaux du congrès général de statistique réuni à Bruxelles les 19, 20, 21 et 22 septembre 1853* (Brussels 1853) 129.

Meanwhile, a French representative, H. Say, goes even further, expressing his wish that ‘all questions be eliminated’ because many ‘details are completely unfeasible in practice’.⁵⁰

The reservations of some members were partly due to the social acceptability of statistical work, a constant concern for statisticians of the nineteenth century,⁵¹ the fact that the international congresses were open to the public being a manifestation of this. The commission’s rapporteur clearly expresses this alongside a liberal ethos, arguing that ‘the reasons for emigration were of a nature that people did not like to disclose; it would, therefore, be difficult to obtain this knowledge; moreover, there was something inquisitorial in these inquiries that could displease many families. Consequently, when it is affirmed that this information will be requested from the authorities and not from the migrants themselves, the majority of debate participants agree that it is useful to maintain this perspective, perhaps convinced by the advocacy of another Belgian, Duceptiaux, who insists on the political and economic importance of the question. It is interesting to note that Duceptiaux himself, although a member of the Belgian statistical commission, is not a statistician but a Belgian journalist with a legal background, who was imprisoned by the Dutch before independence and participated in the 1830 revolution. This led to him becoming the Inspector General of Prisons, a position he still held in 1853, and, notably, he was a prominent figure in Belgian liberalism and freemasonry; he was involved in all the battles for jail reform, for the prohibition of child labour, and for compulsory education.⁵² In these early days of statistics, the boundary between social reformers, liberal elites, and technicians of the science of governance was still quite blurred, partly explaining the hesitations and debates that sometimes appear as an opposition between those who want to know in order to reform, and those who aim to build a practical science with rigorous and precise procedures. These latter figures, particularly on the migration issue, emphasise another difficulty, which seemed to many to be even more insurmountable, and which Dupin also noted.

The existing recording systems were rudimentary in many places and did not allow for the development of migration statistics as envisioned by the commission that prepared the congress programme. As Dupin noted, it was

⁵⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁵¹ Jean-Pierre Beaud, ‘Un débat entre statisticiens du XIXe siècle: comment obtenir la nécessaire collaboration de la population à l’exercice du recensement?’, *Histoire & Mesure* 2 (2022) 125–150.

⁵² Bert Vanhulle, ‘Dreaming about the prison: Édouard Ducpétiaux and prison reform in Belgium (1830–1848)’, *Crime, histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History & Societies* 14:2 (2010) 107–130.

often only possible to establish departures by boat from those registered with the port authorities. Indeed, the preparatory committee of the congress actually implicitly proposed to the representatives of European statistical bodies to compile existing passenger lists rather than to establish new recording procedures, which is probably why the proposal encounters little opposition. The questionnaire proposed to the congress participants in Brussels closely resembles, in its various sections, the forms that passengers of major shipping companies had to fill out, as well as the categories of passenger lists that historians have long been using.⁵³

Yet, the prospect of spreading the practice of keeping population registers throughout Europe seemed quite doubtful to many. As early as 1853, H. Say strongly asserted,

It is stated, in the provision under discussion, that a register of emigration will be opened in each municipality. What is meant by this? We have, in the centre of France, municipalities where not a single line will ever be written.⁵⁴

His intervention was followed by an effect. While reassured by the fact that there was no intention to interrogate the migrants themselves, whose answers could not be considered reliable, the congress participants approved the maintenance of questions concerning the cause of departure. However, as a sign of the importance of practical considerations in these debates, they abandon the idea of asking European states to generalise the keeping of a resident register in each municipality to record departures, even though it was approved during the preparatory meeting.

This muted anxiety that prevailed in 1853 seems to subside thereafter. The mass emigration of Europeans, mentioned on several occasions, is no longer explicitly linked to a decline in public fortune. Indeed, when the question is framed in such terms, some consider that it may actually serve the interests of the motherland, allowing for the departure of surplus labour or even the discontented. Commenting in the early 1860s on statistics related to emigration, the envoy from the United Kingdom seems much more inspired by Malthus than by Colbert. Seeing the massive departures that marked the previous decade as a product of necessity, he even emphasises the utility of encouraging them, writing:

⁵³ Robert P. Swierenga, 'List upon list: the ship passenger records and immigration research', *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10:3 (1991) 42–53.

⁵⁴ *Compte rendu* 131.

The statistics of emigration cover a decade, that is from 1851 to 1860, and show an average of seven emigrants per hundred inhabitants. A noteworthy fact is that Irish emigration, being a necessity dictated by the territory's inability to sustain its population, the need to facilitate, rather than restrict it, is felt more imperatively day by day.⁵⁵

The 1860s and 1870s are further marked, as far as the study and recording of migrations and mobilities are concerned, by a rather rapid change in the questions and curiosities, which do not favour the monitoring and support for the implementation of the initial program.

If in 1853 the ideal census form proposed to the representatives of European states makes no mention of either the nationality or the citizenship of residents, counting the number of foreign nationals present gradually becomes imperative. In 1860, a Swiss delegate, Voigt, supported by Legoyt, proposed for the first time that censuses should henceforth 'identify the number of foreigners', leading, in 1869, Baumhauer to express the wish that it become a standard 'that in future censuses, the inhabitants be divided by country of origin, while also distinguishing their age and sex'.⁵⁶ Similarly, the Florence congress was the setting for lengthy debates, and the opportunity to produce very scholarly reports establishing the need for each municipality to have statistics that distinguish between the legal population and the actual population. This is an effect of the transformations in the modes of administration of territorial communities, which required the distinguishing between mobile and resident individuals within the counted population.

This is not to say that the debates of the mid-nineteenth century were without interest or, indeed, without effects. It is quite clear that the national delegates regarded the resolutions adopted at previous congresses as the standards, and when they could, they took pride in being able to report that their office had implemented these decisions.

The head of the Mecklenburg statistical office announced that his service has been keeping a record of annual maritime emigration since 1854,⁵⁷ while the Bavarian representative asserts in 1857 that Bavaria, from which one does not depart by boat, pays 'great attention to emigration statistics'.⁵⁸ The Duchy of

55 Pierre Maestri, *Compte rendu général des travaux du congrès international de statistique dans les sessions de Bruxelles, 1853, Paris 1855, Vienne 1857, Londres 1869 et Berlin 1863* (Florence 1866) 280.

56 Congrès international de statistique, *Congrès international de statistique à la Haye, septième session, du 6 au 11 septembre 1869. Première partie programme* (The Hague n.d.) 99.

57 *Ibid.*, 247.

58 *Ibid.*, 277.

Baden introduced a statistic on emigration in 1857. It is not certain whether we can consider the gradual generalisation of this data on emigration as the direct and immediate effect of the congress's injunctions alone. However, the Swedish delegate was quite explicit in 1860 in London in presenting the development of emigration statistics as a consequence of the decisions made in Brussels in 1853, declaring that he was able to obtain data 'on emigration and immigration during the period from 1851 to 1855', and 'As far as circumstances permit, more development will be given to this branch of statistics, in accordance with the wishes of the congresses'.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Regarding emigration at least, these international statistical congresses were indeed regarded by some of the participants as a central European statistical commission that guaranteed the scientific nature of the practices of the national offices. I consider that studying these early days of international migration statistics is not only of interest to highlight the role of international movements in the emergence of national departure statistics. The attention given in 1853 to defining procedures for better understanding international migrations, particularly transcontinental migrations, reveals that migration issues were very early on the subject of international conversations which, precisely because of the particular nature of the *Congrès International de Statistiques*, turned out to be both political and scholarly. The creation of shared knowledge in this field, even if not everyone agreed on its forms or the degree of precision it should achieve, was a shared challenge that presupposed international collaboration.

Of course, the knowledge they aim to share does not encompass an understanding of global migrations. The participants in the Brussels and Paris congresses intended to measure the flow of emigrants who were then leaving Europe in increasing numbers, mentioning migrations between European states only incidentally. They proposed to compile data produced by shipping companies and port authorities for this purpose. The ambitious agenda of Brussels, where there was a proposal to determine the reasons for departure, soon appeared out of reach. This aim bears the imprint of the concerns of

⁵⁹ Congrès international de statistique, *Report of the proceedings of the fourth session of the international statistical congress held in London July 16th 1860 and the five following days* (London 1861) 47.

administrators and scholars of uneven liberalism, many of whom feared a weakening of a Europe deprived of the capital taken away by migrants.

This is only a reminder, but one useful to historians, that statistical data bears the mark of the context in which it was created, and incorporates both the peculiarities related to the state of administrative technologies and the resources of states at the time, as well as the imprint of social representations that make it difficult to distinguish ‘the other’, ‘the foreigner’, ‘the alien’ and ‘the migrant’. Such data also bears the mark of the political agendas that justify the establishment of costly means of knowledge, or rather in this case the awkward arrangement of state agendas and national concerns, and the diversity of migratory situations of the European states, making reconciliation difficult.

The contextual nature of the statistical knowledge produced, led to an evolution in the questionnaires and recommendations related to migrations over the course of the first iteration of the international statistical movement. Beginning in the 1860s, the majority of western states generated data concerning the migrations impacting them, as well as the number of foreigners residing within their territories, counting foreigners becoming an international norm. This development appears very early, preceding by several decades the definition of immigration as a political issue in the states of North-Western Europe.⁶⁰

This is an indication that we still have much to learn about the history of statistical knowledge of migrations, but also that reading it as a nexus of international conversations is relevant, allowing both shared developments and national specificities to emerge.

⁶⁰ Frank Caestecker, *Alien policy in Belgium, 1840–1940: the creation of guest workers, refugees and illegal aliens* (New York 2000); Gérald Arlettaz and Silvia Arlettaz, *La Suisse et les étrangers: immigration et formation nationale (1848–1933)* (Lausanne 2004); Leo Lucassen. *The immigrant threat: the integration of old and new migrants in Western Europe since 1850* (Chicago 2005).