

# ILO Century Project



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## The ILO as organizer : shaping the transnational housing scene in the 1920s

**Pierre-Yves Saunier**  
CNRS / Université de Lyon



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It's been a couple of years now since globalization studies have made ways for historical approaches to the interconnected and entangled aspects of our world. For quite a while, history had been a marginal dimension of the discussions about globalization, and historians were at best sidekicks to their colleagues in sociology, economics, geography or political science. A brand new world was in the making, and therefore history became irrelevant. Some thought it would be a flat world where the free flows of goods, capitals and ideas would bring prosperity, others pinpointed the juggernaut effect of unleashed capitalism. Whichever, the debate was amazingly hollow in chronological terms. A focus on the economic aspects of globalization, and a fascination for the prowess of the digital age in terms of time-space compression, placed the emphasis on the last 30 years. History and historians were asked to find the roots of what happened in those recent decades. It took a while to remember colleagues, journalists and authorities that there was some gain to be made by remembering other moments and other places where sections of human kind felt an awareness or hubris of time space compression similar to ours. Once there, historians had a role to play with their usual picks and shovels. Frederick Cooper, a historian of Africa, captured this spirit in 2001. He then identified three questions that were left unasked by the prophets and Cassandras of globalisation: newness (about the historical depth of interconnection), comprehensiveness (the evolving linking and

delinking operated by the circulations at work), and operation (the specificity of the structures that make connections and circulations work).<sup>1</sup> Cooper called for modest but effective ways to analyze processes, networks and social fields that crossed borders by focusing on these empirical questions.

The effects of such plea can now be seen in many different fields. Connections and circulations are being excoriated by historians throughout the history of human kind, and some narratives of contemporary globalization are being revised. One of the many results of this increased sensitivity to history has been the exploration of the historical nature of the much vaunted 'global civil society'.<sup>2</sup> While a large number of studies about international non governmental organizations are still focused on the last 30 years and specific fields such as humanitarian relief, human rights or the environment, a growing number of studies has underscored the interest of considering a time range of some two hundred years.<sup>3</sup> We still have a lot to do to historicize the cross-border activities of voluntary groups and other organizations, but the prospect is rather exciting. We begin to have a better idea of the uneven and unlinear history of now familiar features such as organizational recipes (the international organization), tools (the boycott, the petition), and causes (feminism, justice). One of the issues under investigation is the vexing question of how different international organizations and different types of international organizations interact

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, 2001, vol.100, pp. 189-213.

<sup>2</sup> For Europe, see Stefan Ludwig-Hoffmann, *Civil society*, Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2006, and Arnd Bauerkämper und Christoph Gumb, *Towards a Transnational Civil Society : Actors and Concepts in Europe from the Late Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Veröffentlichungsreihe der Forschungsgruppe „Zivilgesellschaft, Citizenship und politische Mobilisierung in Europa, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Berlin, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global community. The role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world*, Berkeley : California University Press, 2002; Steve Charnowitz, 'Two centuries of participation: NGOs and international governance', *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 18, 183-286, 1996; John Boli & George Thomas, Eds., *Constructing world culture. International nongovernmental organizations since 1875*, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1999 ; Margaret Keck & Kathrin Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders : advocacy networks in international politics*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1998.

with one another. There is a long history of competition and cooperation between Inter-governmental organizations, between non-governmental organizations, and between the former and the latter, which understanding is of importance to appraise the style and substance of a 'global civil society', if any. But the study of these interactions has mostly been left untouched by scholars, who rather focus on individual organizations, or on a specific type of organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Because of its peculiar conception, constitution and operation, the International Labour Organization (thereafter 'the Organization') provides researchers with many opportunities to study just this kind of interactions. It is a window of the relationships that can exist between different inter governmental organizations of the 'second generation', and between inter governmental and non governmental organizations, from the second generation of international organizations and voluntary groups.<sup>5</sup> After an overview of the Organisation structural propinquity with such groups, I will explore the field of housing. As it sought to expand its territory in this field, the Organization and its secretariat, the International Labour Office (there after 'the Office'), competed with the League of nations, and mingled with the several voluntary societies with a significant impact on their existence or operations.

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<sup>4</sup> There are of course exceptions to that pattern of specialization, such as Jacob Darwin Hamblin, "Let there be light ... and bread: the United Nations, the developing world, and atomic energy's Green Revolution", *History and Technology*, Vol. 25, No. 1, March 2009, 23-46 and his focus on the rivalry between the World Health Organization and the Food and Agricultural Organization. Or Matthew Connelly's attempt to consider a whole field where IGOs, INGOs and philanthropic foundations rubbed shoulders (Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: the struggle to control world population*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008). And again the research by Pascal Dauvin and Johanna Siméant comparing and connecting different humanitarian INGOs (Pascal Dauvin and Johanna Siméant, *Le travail humanitaire : les acteurs des ONG du siège au terrain*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> "First generation" international organizations are the different Unions and Bureaux created by inter-state treaties in the late 19th century, e.g the Universal Postal Union. "Second generation" international organizations are those which emerged from the Versailles Treaty. Their relationship with voluntary groups has been explored in specific fields like feminism, child welfare or relief. On child welfare, see the work of Dominique Marshall, 'Children's right in imperial political cultures : missionary and humanitarian contributions to the conference on the African child in 1931', *The international journal of children rights*, 12, 2004, 273-318 ; and 'Tensions nationales, ethniques et religieuses autour des droits des enfants : la participation canadienne au Comité de protection de l'enfance de la Société des Nations', *Lien social et politique. RIAC*, 44, automne 2000, p.101-123.

## **ILO and NGO: beyond the acronyms**

It has often been said that the Organization seems to be the less governmental of the inter-governmental organizations created by the Versailles Treaty. Just like many inter-governmental Unions emerged from the work, pressures and suggestions of professionals, scholars and economic interests groups in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the International Labour Organization did not simply emerged from a multilateral treaty between governments.<sup>6</sup> The Socialist and trade unionists had gathered in Berne in February 1919 to remind the participants in the Peace Conference of the demands of organized labour in compensation for the war effort of the working class. Their voice was present during the Peace Conference as well, as several participated in the Third Commission of the Peace Conference, that on international labour legislation, which drafted the status of the new International Labour Organization. The scholarly and administrative reformist networks of the International Association for Labour Legislation also influenced the set up of the new institutions: Arthur Fontaine, a French civil servant was a secretary of this Commission on International Labour Legislation in Versailles. Later, he would be the president of the Governing Body that presided over the destiny of the International Labour Organization, and he was an old hand of the International Association for Labour Legislation, and many members of the latter were included in the delegations at the first International Labour Conference in Washington in 1919. National labour delegations to the Commission on International Labour Legislation, were also vital in shaping the constitution of the International Labour Organization. Trade unionists of

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<sup>6</sup> Jasmien van Daele has analyzed 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, p. 435-466, while Victor Yves Ghebali, in *L'Organisation Internationale du Travail*, Genève : Georg, 1987, has underlined the connections of the Office with the Peace Conference Commission.

various creeds, from the American Federation of Labour to the French Confédération Générale du Travail, contributed to steer and drive the Commission's work.

The Organization's original constitution was broadly shaped by these convergences and pressures, with the well known tripartite contribution by government, employers and workpeople delegates.<sup>7</sup> This tripartite structure was the organization principle behind all the machinery of the Organization, from the International Labour Conferences to the Governing Body, and through the Commission of Inquiries that would investigate complaints by national governments about the non implementation of labour conventions. Because trade unions and employer's associations were part of the organization, it is no big surprise that the definition of 'non government' members appeared for the first time in the labour provisions of the Peace Treaty.<sup>8</sup> This terminology, which later emerged as a full fledged category in UN Charter article 71,<sup>9</sup> seems to have been occasionally used in labour reformers circles and ILO early vocabulary. Sophy Sanger, formerly 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>10</sup> Sanger was a member of the Washington Labour Conference secretariat, and one of the first officials of the ILO, where she was in charge of the *Legislative series*. The importance of the connection with such groups was clear for many other ILO officials, and when Thomas sketched the forthcoming activity of the Office's scientific and

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<sup>7</sup> Treaty of Peace between the allied and associated powers and Germany, articles 387 sqq.

<sup>8</sup> Article 389: 'The Members undertake to nominate non-government delegates and advisers chosen in agreement with the industrial organisations'.

<sup>9</sup> Article 71 dealt with arrangements between the UN Economic and Social Council and 'non governmental organizations'.

<sup>10</sup> Sophy Sanger 'Practical problems of international labour legislation', in John Solano, ed, *Labour as an international problem*, London : Macmillan, 1920, p.136.

intelligence section, he placed it under the aegis of the International Association for Labour Legislation past work.<sup>11</sup>

The practical work of the Organization confirmed 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 its secretariat *modus operandi*. For Thomas, who had been a socialist, trade union and cooperative leader, this connection seems to have been a central concern, least the Office would be nothing but a bureaucratic organization. The Office staff, that included many members of labour and labour reform activist groups, by no means only socialist ones, did share this concern out of conviction and affinities. The abundance of information that circulated between the ILO and trade unions, of which only a section was published in the numerous periodicals produced by the Office or by the workers' movements periodicals all over the world, clearly shows this operational propinquity between the Office and 'non government organizations'.

True, the League of Nations also developed such an intense communication with non-government associations in its early years. By many aspects, the initial reason for such a collaboration was sheer instrumentality: of the relationship, as such private groups were seen as channels to spread the word about the importance and usefulness of the League. Very soon, though, the League's nature as an inter-governmental organization geared towards high politics resurfaced. From 1924, a restrictive application was given to article 24 of the Covenant, the one that had initially been used to develop working relationships with these organizations. Reminders were issued that the League was an organization of states, and those in

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Thomas, "The task of the International Labour Office", in Solano, p. 254.

the international secretariat who were enthusiastic about cooperation with 'non public and semi public organizations', as League terminology got it, had to yield ground.<sup>12</sup>

The International Labour Organization and Office own links with the non-government associations was certainly not deprived of tactical purposes: the more business and worker groups would be anxious to participate in the discussion and exchange with the Office, the better for the standing of the latter. But there was more to it than a cynical attitude. Co-operation with non-governmental groups was part of the Organization DNA, and it remained an option because the Office was not staffed by foreign relations specialists, but by men and women with a record track in the world of labour activism. In fact, League of Nations staff sometimes accused their Office colleagues of amateurism because of the participation of employers' and workers' representatives in the ILO's international activities.<sup>13</sup> The proximity of the Office staff with a range of voluntary societies, trade unions and other non-governmental groups opened a range of possibilities that were harnessed to strengthen the ILO, its legitimacy and its jurisdiction.

This paper will focus on a specific aspect of the interaction between the Office and 'non government organisations', namely the fact that the ILO cooperated with, nurtured, supervised or manipulated these groups. Another inter-governmental organization, UNESCO, and another Thomas, Jean, are best known for such a pro active policy. Jean Thomas and Julian Huxley, as associate director and director of UNESCO, led an active policy to create, support and maintain international nongovernmental organisations in the orbit of UNESCO in its early years. The

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<sup>12</sup> On this topic, see Charnowitz, p. 220 sqq. This view, based on League Council decisions, is confirmed by archival work on the relationships between the League sections and non-government groups.

<sup>13</sup> An ILO officer would later report the opinion of a League staff member 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, p. 219 from David Blaloch, 'The international labor organization', in *World organization, a balance sheet of the first great experiment*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs 1942, p. 321.

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 couple of others was the result of the interaction between Huxley, Thomas and the stakeholders in these fields. UNESCO subsidized these groups and maintained a close work relationship with them. It used their expertise for policy making, their networks for public relations, and their presence to influence government members and balance the pressure of the latter on UNESCO.<sup>14</sup> There are, in fact many interesting common points between UNESCO and the ILO, beginning with constitutional features (delegations to conferences should be made of specialists, members of delegations should vote as individuals and not as nationals, etc). But the most salient commonality might be that the two first directors of both organizations wanted to remake the world and saw the institution they had to lead as a touchstone for this endeavour. Both embodied a highly charismatic definition of personal leadership, which was made visible by the intensity of their publishing, public speaking and travelling activity. This view, which was the product of a lifetime of social, political and scientific commitment, was the touchstone for their conception of cooperation with partners other than states and government officials.

### **Exploring the workers ‘conditions of life’: housing as a contested field**

No organizational chart of the ILO ever included a section on the conditions of life of the workers. Though, Albert Thomas had made it clear very early that he would take it for granted that the Peace Treaty was entitling the International Labour Organization to tackle issues well beyond the shop floor. In 1920, he put it on paper

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<sup>14</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: Brookings Institution 1996. See also Julian Huxley, *Memories*, vl.2, London: Allen & Uniwin, 1973.

that the co-operative Section of the Office might be the most adequate platform to engage with this “wider sphere”, as the co-operative movement was dealing with domains that were part of the conditions of life of the workers (production, consumption, leisure, living conditions). Within these new territories, wrote Thomas, housing and transport facilities were vital aspects in the welfare of workers.<sup>15</sup> Despite this early announcement, the Office was too busy to follow up. But an opportunity seemed to have triggered explorations in the field of housing.

The archive and library of the ILO bear witness of the number of individuals and organisations who corresponded with the Office or its national branches, hoping to get attention, cooperation or even subsidies. Signore Magalodi, the president of the executive committee for the International Housing Congress of Rome, was one of them. Probably after some preliminary talks (Thomas was in Rome at the time Magalodi wrote his letter), he wrote to the Office Italian branch in March 1922, with a request for the Office to officially take part to the Congress that was planned for the end of September 1922. Magalodi emphasized the importance of the ‘healthy, merry and cheap house’ for the workers, and hence for the Office’s mission.<sup>16</sup> Magalodi made several proposals: the Office might contribute to the Rome Congress by helping the congress to recruit fee-paying member, or by preparing a report, or even through some financial subsidy. It is quite likely that contacts had been made earlier on and Magalodi knew that financial support was out of the question. This point was in fact not even addressed in the correspondence between the ILO officers who drafted the Office’s answer. From the start, Albert Thomas said that the ILO would only be able to provide documentation, and handed the file over to the Scientific

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas in Solano, p.259-260.

<sup>16</sup> ILO archives, Geneva, W 1000/8/1, Documents, Magaldi to Rome branch office, 18 March 1922.

Division. The latter, under the direction of the US economist Royal Meeker<sup>17</sup>, devised a plan for research. He suggested a series of national reports on housing, and the subsequent edition of a general report. That is, the kind of process that had been set up for the Genoa conference on the 8 hours working day. The general report would be presented at the Rome Congress by an Office representative.

The process began in earnest in early May 1922, when Meeker explained to Thomas that the Office's report would focus on workers' housing legislation and workers housing statistics. Two members of the staff, both Austrians, were put in responsibility. Hugo von Haan, a statistician, was put in charge of collecting the data while Karl Pribram, the head of the research and statistical department, was to represent the Office at the Conference.<sup>18</sup> Once this documentation work had begun, Thomas seemed to have thought that housing was a touchstone from where to develop the Office's activities in the field of 'industrial welfare'. He then asked Meeker to explore possibilities of expanding the work beyond the report itself. Meeker, after canvassing the situation with Pribram, suggested that the Rome congress was an opportunity for the Office to step into new territories. And he imagined a Trojan horse to do so: the creation of a coordinating organisation for all countries with an interest into workers' housing. 'It is highly appropriate in my judgment that the ILO should become the permanent secretarial office for an international organisation on industrial housing', Meeker wrote.<sup>19</sup> This possible organisation should develop into a new subdivision of the Office dedicated to 'Housing and Welfare', where Von Haan

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<sup>17</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 1923 to become the Secretary of labor and industry in Pennsylvania. He was a member of the American Association for Labor Legislation.

<sup>18</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.

<sup>19</sup> ILO, W 1000/8/1, Minute, Meeker to Thomas 29 May 1922.

would supervise and expand the kind of work that was being done for the housing report. The proposal being vetted by Thomas, and Von Haan having been entrusted with the task to present his report at the Rome Congress, the latter began his campaign to gather documents and data.<sup>20</sup> Additional strategy was later imagined to conquer the heart and minds of the flock of housing activists who were to gather in Rome. Imre Ferenczi, a figure of municipal housing policies in pre-war Budapest<sup>21</sup>, a standing member of the Comité Permanent des Congrès Internationaux de l'Habitation (which was the organizational face of the International Housing Congresses), and now a member of the Office staff would be sent to Rome with Von Haan. His own brief would be to use his connections to 'orient the Congress' towards the Office, and towards Geneva.<sup>22</sup>

Early in August 1922, Von Haan handed out reports on housing in 11 European countries plus the United States. At the end of that month, the news from the postponement of the Rome Congress, with fascist *squadrismo* violence at its peak, did not alter the momentum. Von Haan's housing studies were even given a go ahead for expansion precisely because of this postponement. But, having lost the Rome opportunity to establish the Office at a hub of housing discussions, new channels of action were sought, and found. During the 4th session of the International Labour Conference, in November 1922, two Italian delegates presented

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<sup>20</sup> In this paper, I will focus on housing, though Von Haan made significant explorations or studies in the field of leisure and welfare work. This included his attendance to the International Conference of Welfare Workers at Argeronne in France (1922) and his subsequent appointment as expert adviser of the committee which emerged from this meeting to give birth to the Association Internationale de Service Social Industriel. In a note where he listed his activities to ask for a promotion, Von Haan claimed his presence was important in 'closely connecting this new international movement to our organisation' (ILO, Hugo von Haan staff file, Documents, Von Haan to Thomas 16 June 1924).

<sup>21</sup> Susan Zimmermann. *Prächtige Armut: Fürsorge, Kinderschutz und Sozialreform in Budapest; Das 'sozialpolitische Laboratorium' der Doppelmonarchie im Vergleich zu Wien 1873-1914*, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> There was in fact competition from Ferenczi to seize up the housing work inside the Office, but this does not need to be detailed here.

a resolution project that asked the Office to launch studies about housing.<sup>23</sup> Far from being spontaneous, the resolution had been prompted by Ferenczi and its text was approved by Thomas. The piece of tactic devised earlier that summer had established a roadmap. Ferenczi would publish an article about the housing situation in Europe, which stressed the Office legitimacy in entering the housing sphere, this article would be distributed to some delegates of the International Labour Conference, and some of them would present a resolution to the Conference.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of the Rome Congress where the Office would have showcased 'public opinion' support for its housing forays, the resolution was to manifest such support to an activity that was already being developed by the Office!

The resolution was deferred to the ILO's Governing Body, where Thomas referred to previous notes by Pribram, Meeker and Von Haan to present the case to the 17<sup>th</sup> Governing Body session in February 1923. Thomas made his point by insisting that housing was an international question and a labour question, and qualified for the Office's attention. This was, said Thomas, a logical spin-off of Article 427 in the Peace Treaty that 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 in pursuit of the studies was voted

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<sup>23</sup> Resolution 8, p.147 in *Conférence Internationale du Travail*, Compte rendu définitif, IV session, Geneva: ILO, 1922. One of them was Ludovico d'Aragona, a socialist party member of the parliament and the national secretary of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, the largest Italian trade union organization. D'Aragona was close from the latter in terms of trajectory and attitudes. Exiled in France in 1895, D'Aragona was involved in municipal socialism undertakings in Milan as municipal councillor, in 1900 and 1904. As a national secretary from 1918 onwards, he led the reformist wing of CGIL, resisted the move towards the Red International, and put an end to the revolutionary strikes of 1920. This last move was hailed in the Office periodicals. D'Aragona remained at the head of CGIL until it was dissolved by the fascist government in 1925.

<sup>24</sup> Ferenczi's article, 'Die Wohnungsfrage und die Internationale Arbeitsorganisation', was published in *Soziale Praxis*, 41, 12 October 1922. The whole episode is documented in ILO archives, CAT 10-41 'Incident Pribram-Ferenczi'.

by the narrowest margin (9 vs 7).<sup>25</sup> Thomas nevertheless had to concede that the Office would focus on comparing methods, in order to avoid to interfere with national policies. At the same session, Thomas presented his note on leisure to the Governing Body, in the hope that the subject would be placed in front of the 1923 Labour Conference delegates. The fact that the Governing Body postponed the examination of this note until the 1924 conference gave Von Haan free reign to tackle the housing chapter.

Von Haan then drafted a plan for a more ambitious research programme. The idea was to publish the recently completed national studies in the Office's *Etudes et Documents* series, then to launch a new set of investigations on a larger number of countries, and eventually to publish a synthetic statement on the housing problem. When submitted to his superiors, this scientific program was accompanied by an assessment of housing as a policy, where Von Haan sketched the range of possible actions in the field, taking into consideration the tension he saw between the return to free enterprise mechanisms and the development of public policies: the time was ripe for the Office to take a strong position in favour of the latter. In order to build up the Office capacity and position, von Haan also proposed a sustained campaign to acquire information (bibliography, collection of designs, clipping of periodicals), paralleled with intensive correspondence and connections with specialist networks to 'stabilize studies about workers' housing in its (the Office) own sphere of activity'.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas gave green light in May 1923, and Von Haan marched forward: he sent his European report to in house and external experts, and began to get personally

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<sup>25</sup> *Procès verbaux de la 17<sup>e</sup> session du Conseil d'administration du BIT*, discussion du 17 février 1923, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> ILO W 1000/8/1, minutes, report Von Haan, February 1923. My translation.

acquainted with the networks of housing reformers in Europe.<sup>27</sup> As he added the investigation of workers' leisure on top of this, he became, in the word of his superior 'a little service on his own, in charge of housing and welfare'.<sup>28</sup> The publication of *European housing problems since the war 1914-1923* in 1924, followed by a thinner volume about the United States in 1925, had a deep impact on the field. Whereas Von Haan was, until then, seeking information from individuals and associations, the latter now asked the ILO for publications for their own use. The Office had become a source of knowledge and a platform for information about housing.

### **A field in disarray**

The new presence of the ILO as an authority was facilitated by the situation of the other protagonists who contributed to the interchange of housing practices and information across borders. After the war, the Comité Permanent des Congrès Internationaux de l'Habitation found it quite difficult to organize a new housing congress. Since the first congress in Paris in 1889, 9 congresses had taken place, but the Comité had remained a committee without any personnel and financial means of its own, whose role it was to designate the place and the agenda of conferences, leaving it to local committees to actually organise them. This was not a strong enough situation to overcome the differences within and between the European housing reform networks, especially after the War. Strife raged on many fronts. About conceptions of housing, as the private nature of housing provision was disputed by supporters of a growing governmental intervention. The latter themselves

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<sup>27</sup> In July 1923, Von Haan attended the Congrès International d'urbanisme et d'hygiène municipale in Strasbourg, where he discovered that such meetings were not specialist sessions devoted to discussion and study, but friendly encounters where many if not most of the registered members and speakers were not present (ILO, D 600/693, minutes, von Haan to Thomas 27 July 1923). He also asked to attend the International Town Planning Conference in Gothenburg (Sweden), but this was denied (ILO, W 1000/5/7).

<sup>28</sup> ILO, Hugo von Haan folder, Documents, Meekers' grading report for 1924.

argued about whether such a proactive public housing policy should be directed by local authorities or by the national government.<sup>29</sup> Other disputes opposed specialists of housing with up and coming 'town planning' professionals who considered housing as an aspect of comprehensive planning.<sup>30</sup> Last but not least, the German and Austrian members who spurred the organisation before the war had not been invited back into the Comité after it reconvened in Brussels in 1920. At a time when major public housing projects were contemplated in Red Vienna, this did cut off the Committee from some of the most advanced circles of the housing scene. The cherry on the cake was a creeping mutual irritation between continental and British housing leaders, based on language problems and different cultures of public debate.<sup>31</sup> Many of these problems had been rampant for a long while, but the War made them insuperable for a weak organization. The postponement and cancellation of the Rome Congress was a death blow for the Comité.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, new protagonists joined into cross-border conversation about housing in the aftermath of the War. Various cities organized housing conferences and exhibitions, like the city of Lyon in 1919, 1920 and 1921.<sup>33</sup> Other international associations, from public work firms associations to property unions and municipal groups, also put housing on their map. With housing as a pressing issue on the agenda of governments, trade unions, firms and professionals, the Comité's inability

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<sup>29</sup> For leads and clues, see "Architecture et politiques sociales 1900-1940", *Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale*, n.15/16/17, 1985, and Nicholas Bullock & James Read, *The movement for housing reform in Germany and France 1840-1914*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1985

<sup>30</sup> See Stefan Couperus, "Amsterdam 1924: a stage for municipal internationalism", paper presented at the European Association of Urban Historians Conference, Stockholm, August 30 – September 2, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> F.M Wibaut papers, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv. nr 23, Hudig to Wibaut 18 December 1922. Warmest thanks to Stefan Couperus and Renaud Payre for having shared their notes on these documents with me.

<sup>32</sup> The Belgians Lepreux (president of the *Comité Permanent*) and Velghe (secretary) tried to find another location, but this proved impossible precisely because of all the other problems. See the correspondence in F.M Wibaut papers, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv.. nr 23.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Changing the city: urban international information and the Lyon municipality, 1900-1940" *Planning perspectives*, vol.14, n.1, 1999, p.19-48.

to restore its previous central role as platform for discussion and exchange of experiences, conceptions, designs and regulations, the stakes were out for grabs.

This happened at the very moment when the Office was looking for partners to develop its housing studies and, beyond that, the expansion of its activities to the welfare field. As we have seen, the Comité had been identified as the specialist network that should be captured and placed in the orbit of the Office. Encouragements by Albert Thomas or Von Haan to the faltering Comité were numerous.<sup>34</sup> But they also made connections with some of the other international societies which now contributed to the debate. The International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation was one of these.<sup>35</sup> Von Haan began to exchange publications and documentation with their London based secretariat, and got acquainted with some of its leaders who happened to attend the International Labour Conferences, like the Swedish diplomat Eric Sjöstrand.<sup>36</sup> Through other channels, the Bureau also liaised with the International Union of Cities,<sup>37</sup> whose creation in 1913 and revival after the War had a lot to do with the European socialist network.<sup>38</sup> Emile Vinck, the Belgian director of the Union of Cities, was an old comrade of Thomas', like the Dutch Florentinus Marinus Wibaut. Even closer to Thomas was the third major profile in the International Union of Cities, the Frenchman Henri Sellier. The two men had worked together in the Groupe d'Etudes Socialistes, the French

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<sup>34</sup> One example in W/1000/8/1, 'Documents, ILO to Velghe, 16 February 1924.

<sup>35</sup> This organization changed name several times between 1918 and 1940 (International Federation of Town and Country Planning, International Federation of Housing and Town Planning, International Federation of Housing and Planning...). In this paper I will stick to International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation for the sake of convenience.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Kampffmeyer, another member of the Federation executive committee, was in charge of the Austrian chapter for the ILO study on the cooperative movement.

<sup>37</sup> This group also changed name between the wars (International Union of Cities and Local Authorities), and I will likewise stick to International Union of Cities for convenience.

<sup>38</sup> On these two organizations, 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*, (Grande-Bretagne), vol.25 (2) June 2001, p.380-403. A forthcoming doctoral thesis on the history of the International Federation (Michel Geertse, VU University, Amsterdam) will shed a comprehensive light on the history of this society.

urban and municipal socialist think tank of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup> Edgard Milhaud, another French socialist who taught economics at the University of Geneva and was an Office staff member, was also a long time acquaintance of Sellier and Vinck, and had taken part into the Union founding congress. Besides, International Union of Cities' leaders were very active in national housing associations and institutions. As an alderman for the City of Amsterdam, Wibaut was in charge of housing; Vinck was the founder of the Société Nationale d'Habitations à Bon Marché in Belgium; and Sellier was the administrator of the Office Départemental des Habitations à Bon Marché in Paris since 1916. Initially, it was the Office who sought the Union resources for documenting Von Haan's housing studies.<sup>40</sup> A first result was that Milhaud attended the International Union of Cities conference in Amsterdam in July 1924, only a few days before the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation congress in The Hague.

It seems that the Dutch conferences were also the first opportunity to consider the merging of the old with another group. Cross membership among the Comité, the International Union of Cities and the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation was commonplace. Indeed, housing, planning and municipal policies had often been conceived as facets of a single issue in the portfolio or urban and social reform earlier in the century.<sup>41</sup> Emile Vinck, the executive director of the International Union of Cities, was thus a member of the Federation Executive Council and connected with the Comité. This propinquity seems to have offered possibilities for some Comité members to look for solutions while their organisation stalled. The

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<sup>39</sup> On Sellier and his connection to Thomas: Katherine Burlen (Ed.), *La banlieue-oasis. Henri Sellier et les cités-jardins*, Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1987, and Christophe Prochasson, « Entre science et action sociale : le réseau Albert Thomas et le socialisme normalien 1900-1914 », in Christian Topalov, *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France 1880-1914*, Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1999, p.141-158.

<sup>40</sup> ILO, S 01/2032, documents, Von Hann's note, February 1923.

<sup>41</sup> See the different contributions in Topalov, *Laboratoires*.

merger with the Federation, a dynamic group with a growing presence beyond the Atlantic Ocean and a focus germane to housing (the garden city) emerged from a series of informal discussions in The Hague in 1924 and in New York in 1925. One by product of these talks was the growing presence of housing topics on the 1925 and 1926 conference agendas of the Federation. After the final crash of the Comité, following its failure to hold a conference in Brussels in 1925, the Comité opened negotiations to discuss the creation of a housing section within the Federation. Emile Vinck was the leader of the Comité's negotiating party that also included the French Sellier and the Dutch Hudig, a close partner of Wibaut. Formal talks began in London in June 1926, and both sides placed their cards on the table. The housing reformers were above all anxious not to see their concerns merely subsumed under town planning topics. They wanted their own autonomous section, while the Federation officers stressed that unity in the expanded organisation was to be paramount.<sup>42</sup> Promises were made by the negotiating parties, and the old Comité was proclaimed extinct at the next congress of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation (International Congress of Housing and City Planning, Vienna, September 1926). This is when this trivial story of associative international life began to seriously intersect with the International Labour Office housing projects.

### **The watchtower**

As said before, prospects looked good after Hugo von Haan's first housing studies were published.<sup>43</sup> They were widely and favourably circulated, read and commented. Albert Thomas had asked for a 'recommendation' about leisure to be submitted to the

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<sup>42</sup> Details are available in the papers of a US member of the Federation who received all documents. Cornell University, Kroch Library, John Nolen Papers, box 70, 'International Garden city and town planning Federation April 1923-April 1927'.

<sup>43</sup> Almost at the same moment, Hugo von Haan was shifting to studies on scientific management and looking forward to get promoted, and his involvement into housing studies faltered.

VI<sup>th</sup> session of the International Labour Conference, to be circulated to member governments if approved. This was a step further for installing housing in the territory of the International Labour Organization, and with an unambiguous stance for public housing policies. Among other clauses dealing with afterhours work, education or anti alcoholism work, the proposed recommendation coped with housing and praised the provision of healthy and affordable housing 'if necessary through the action of local and national administrations'. During the International Labour Conference, the commission in charge of elaborating the final draft met several times and consistently rebuked the opposition of the employers group, as well as a request from the British government to limit the subject matter and keep housing off limits. The result was a confirmation of the proposed recommendation, the housing part being even promoted to a section of its own. The recommendation was adopted without opposition by the 1924 International Labour Conference. But it was immediately edged off by discussions during the following session of the Governing Body. 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.

However, new possibilities loomed large in the eyes of the Office staff. When Edgard Milhaud participated in the previously mentioned Dutch conferences, discussions took place with the International Union of Cities leaders about possible cooperation with the Office. On 17 December 1924, Vinck went down to Geneva to meet with Thomas and his team. Beyond polite contact and promises to exchange documentation, a joint research project was established.<sup>44</sup> Vinck, Thomas and Pribram agreed on a common study of housing statistics to generate comparable

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<sup>44</sup> ILO, S 01/2032/1, Documents, 'Entrevue avec Mr Emile Vinck, Directeur de l'Union International des Villes', memo by Edgard Milhaud.

data through the uniformisation of statistical categories. The workflow foresaw a study by Pribram's statistical section, followed by a conference of Office staff members with a group of statisticians gathered by the International Union of Cities. The purpose was to contribute to the establishment of common categories for housing statistics, for it to be endorsed by specialists and by local authorities.<sup>45</sup> Despite the lack of actual cooperation from the International Union of Cities, the Office went ahead on its part. A first draft of the statistical report was ready in September 1925, and Office statistician Robert Guye developed it further.<sup>46</sup> In April 1926, the adjusted plan was to use the International Union of Cities as an endorsement agency, to seek further approval by the International Institute of Statistics, and to present a report to the General Conference of Statisticians of Labour. The conclusions would then be transformed into recommendations for the national governments to handle housing statistics. Thomas exposed the whole idea in his report to the Labour Conference in 1926.

This was just the tip of the Office activities about housing. Since the end of 1925, in line with Von Haan's original plan, Guye regularly combed 30-40 periodicals to feed a 'Chronique du Logement' in *Informations sociales*, one of the Office periodicals. He also maintained a file of housing legislation in the ILO member countries, and an 'index of personalities and institutions that take an active part in

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<sup>45</sup> It quickly became usual for the the International Labour Office and Organization to enter a field through a statistical approach, which were seen as a convenient medium to provide these organizations with legitimacy and a capacity to frame the categories of other protagonists. See for instance Paul-André Rosental, "Géopolitique et état-providence. Le BIT et la politique mondiale des migrations dans l'entre-deux-guerres", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol.61, no.1, 2006, pp. 99-134. Dzovinar Kévonian, 'La légitimation par l'expertise : le Bureau international du travail et la statistique internationale', in Aglan, Alya, Olivier Feiertag and Dzovinar Kévonian (eds), *Albert Thomas, société mondiale et internationalisme. Réseaux et institutions des années 1890 aux années 1930*, Actes des journées d'études des 19 et 20 janvier 2007, Université Paris I, *Cahier Irice*, No 2, 2007, <http://irice.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?rubrique68> (accessed 20 May 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Idem, Documents, Milhaud to Maurette, 16 April 1926.

housing policy'.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, a new series of study about housing policies were on their way. This ambitious plan included a volume on housing in the urban centres, another one on housing in rural areas, and a possible extension to extra-European countries.

For all these reasons, Pribram seized the opportunity of the 1926 Federation Congress in Vienna to attend the housing sessions, with Guye. Pribram's motivations were coherent with the attitude of the Office since 1922: the aim was to identify a strong movement that could interact practically and rhetorically with the Office to push for the development of ILO's presence and work about housing. After the Comité had disappeared, the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation was the most likely opportunity to contract with such a partner. The event made it possible for Pribram to capture the different conceptions of housing that framed the field: cottagers against apartment building supporters, free market rules vs public authorities subsidy or construction policy. This visit allowed Pribram to reconnect with the leaders and doers in the field. He met Vinck, Sellier, the town councillor of Vienna Anton Weber, the British architect Raymond Unwin and many municipal and national officials to whom he explained the Office's studies and interest.<sup>48</sup> His general judgement on the congress was nonetheless quite blunt, as he underscored the fact that no focused discussion had taken place and no conclusion had been voted. He also reported that the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation seemed keen to integrate housing in its field as it officially took over from the Comité, but he expressed fear that this would imply a downgrading of specific housing questions such as finance, tenants rights, rents or construction

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<sup>47</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 30 April 1929.

<sup>48</sup> His report in W/1000/5/10, Documents, "Rapport pour le directeur".

costs, because the Federation would by and large give prominence to the town planning sides of housing (land use, density).

Pribram's report seems to have derived largely from conversation with people who mentioned such concerns. In fact, these concerns almost immediately plagued the new organization. Between November 1926 and October 1927, the freshly renamed International Federation of Housing and Planning fell into pieces. The point of irritation was the autonomy of the new housing section vis-à-vis the London headquarters. Both parties felt their initial understanding had been betrayed: former Comité representatives resented the attempt of the London headquarters to make the new housing section a mere appendix of a centralized organization, whereas International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation leaders indicted the 'housers' requirement for an autonomous headquarters backed by public subsidies. This, they said, would have destroyed the independence and unity of the Federation.<sup>49</sup> The debate opposed a group with a strong continental, municipal, socialist and housing component to another with a core consisting of British professionals or government officials and old hands of the Federation. The first group proposed the establishment of an administratively and financially autonomous headquarter for the housing section. This battle activated or re activated other front lines within the new Federation: between 'planners' and 'housers', between national civil servants/local authorities elected officials, between professionals and government representatives, between continentals and Britons, between socialists and liberals, between cottages and apartment building supporters, between private market and active governmental policies and between supporters of different cultures of associative life. This was too many conflicts, and a very confusing situation quickly

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<sup>49</sup> IISG, Wibaut papers, "Internationale Volkshuisvesting", Inv. nr 23, Hudig to Wibaut 24 November 1926 and Wibaut to Hudig 25 november 1926. John Nolen Papers, box 70 folder 'International Federation 1923-1928', captures the view from London.

developed where even the fiercest antagonists struggled to find their bearings, while outsiders got completely lost.<sup>50</sup> Only the International Labour Office, possibly, saw its way through. All the more that the supporters of an autonomous housing section had good connections with the International Labour Organization circles. Thomas' comrades Wibaut, Sellier and Vinck were the leaders of this group, while Sjöstrand of the Swedish embassy in Geneva and the German socialist and housing activist Hans Kampffemeyer played vital roles, together with Kloti the director of the City of Zürich Housing Office.

The leaders of the new housing section officially approached the Office in 1927.<sup>51</sup> They inquired about some 'housing event' that the Office was said to organize, warned against overlap and waste, and offered the cooperation of their group to the common effort for housing progress. Thomas sent confirmation of the Office's schemes for some kind of international event (about which no other mention has been found yet in the Office's archives), and stressed the Office's desire to carry on with the kind of work the old Comité had done: to study the practical experiments in housing that were conducted in different countries and cities, and draw lessons from these. Thomas also approved the idea of cooperation with the new section, and proposed to discuss the possibilities of cooperation during its preliminary meeting. This was to take place in Luxembourg in June 1927, and Karl Pribram was sent there. Pribram was treated with high regards. He met with the Executive Committee of the Federation, presented the Office's studies of housing to conference, and received a lot of public and private praise about the Office's work. He also socialized with various housing executives who were very keen to bring their contribution to the

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<sup>50</sup> As shown by the diary of Rowland Egger, a US Political scientist who worked for the merger of the two groups later in the 1930s (parts of the diary are available at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, other parts at the Special Collection and Manuscripts department of the Regenstein Library, University of Chicago).

<sup>51</sup> ILO, W/9/4, Documents, Bruggeman to Thomas 9 février 1927.

Office's studies.<sup>52</sup> During his visit, he concluded an informal agreement for the collaboration between the housing section and the Office.<sup>53</sup> But Pribram was not blinded by the warm welcome he received. He did realize that the housing section was far from being able to establish or even discuss a working schedule. He reported to Thomas that the structure of the section was uncertain, its leaders not having prepared discussions well enough to avoid 'painful' discussions about the location of the possible housing section headquarters.<sup>54</sup> This uncertainty was, nevertheless, an opportunity for the Office to shape the situation according to its aims.

### **From the Geneva project to the Frankfurt connection**

In 1927, Albert Thomas had prophesied in front of the International Labour Conference that the moment was close when progress in housing would benefit from 'a great movement of international public opinion'.<sup>55</sup> He meant the creation of the housing section within the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation, and this was the basis for bold moves by the Office in 1928.

On the one hand, the Office seemed able to capitalize on its statistical studies. Guye and Pribram had finished their study, and *Les Méthodes de la statistique de l'Habitation* was published in the end of 1928.<sup>56</sup> It was a survey of the different national and municipal methods to organize housing statistics, and it included proposals for common categories that would make data comparable, and common policies conceivable. Further steps were to seek endorsement by statisticians in the field. A meeting was scheduled for May 1928 in Munich with municipal statisticians

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<sup>52</sup> ILO, W/1000/2/5, documents, report by Pribram.

<sup>53</sup> Pribram suggested that the most pressing issues were those of the role of states, municipalities and cooperatives in housing construction, the financial aspects of loans for constructing programs and the rights of tenants.

<sup>54</sup> The municipalities of Berlin and Amsterdam made rival bids to host the headquarters.

<sup>55</sup> Conférence 1927, Rapport du directeur, p.129.

<sup>56</sup> Etudes et Documents, série N statistique, n°13.

convened by the Union Internationale des Villes. And the Institut International de Statistiques was to take a resolution on housing statistics in the fall, based on the report prepared by one of its commissions. The *rapporteur* of this commission was no other than Karl Pribram. The visibility of the Office statistical study was also expanded by a visit to a housing conference organized by the Kommunale Vereinigung für Wohnungswesen, which Pribram and Guye attended together after the Munich session.<sup>57</sup> The Office seemed in a position where it called the tune on the statistical front.

On the other hand, the new round of housing studies by Guye and Pribram were progressing. Pribram's departure from the Office was not enough to darken these bright perspectives.<sup>58</sup> The official establishment of the Federation's housing section, due to take place in Paris in July 1928, was eagerly expected. The event would demonstrate that the movement of 'public opinion' in favour of public housing was growing, and that the Office was the right institution in the right place to provide fuel, impulse and direction to this movement.

This is just what Thomas endeavoured to demonstrate in his Director's report to the 1928 International Labour Conference. He insisted that the housing question had clearly entered a second phase since the end of the war, as the circumstances required the provision of new housing by public authorities and for non profit organisations.<sup>59</sup> The Office, he said, was ready to support that new phase, with its

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<sup>57</sup> This participation was proposed by Pribram to present the statistical work.

<sup>58</sup> Pribram was chosen for a professorship in economics at the University of Frankfurt. He kept alive his interest for housing after his departure from the office, as he frequently wrote and lectured on that topic. It is likely that he was somehow connected to municipal housing policy in Frankfurt while he was there. As a result, he may have had a role in the proposal by the Frankfurt municipality to host the International Housing Association. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to consult Pribram's papers at the State University of New York at Albany (Pribram left Germany for the USA in 1933).

<sup>59</sup> Christian Topalov wrote that 1928 was indeed a peak in the apparent favour for public housing, with the vote of the Loucheur Law in France and before the recovery of the private sector in Germany and the United Kingdom. See his « La politique de l'habitat dans les politiques sociales 1900-1940. Notes pour un débat », *Cahiers de la recherche architecturale*, 15-17, 1985, p.15.

new studies of housing and its statistical report. During the Conference itself, opportunity would be given to Thomas to push this further. Chaman Lall, an Indian workers' delegate, asked for a general study of the housing question and living conditions of the workers, especially out of Europe. His resolution was seconded by a Japanese delegate, and it argued that the Office should launch studies on the subject and have them examined at a next Conference.<sup>60</sup> In his report to the Governing Body, Thomas was able to conflate Lall's resolution with the statement that 'public opinion' was increasingly in favour of public housing policies in Germany, the UK and France.<sup>61</sup> He then explained that the Office was familiar with the 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. Thomas concluded that, being the clearing house for housing questions in Europe and in the world, the Office would soon be able to draft a convention or a recommendation about the most effective methods in the field. Thomas's comments on Lall's resolution nailed the point. Acknowledging the 1922 and 1924 discussions about the 'borderline issue' status of housing questions, his conclusion was that 'everyone in interested circles agreed that no organisation other than ours was better qualified to tackle this problem'.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, such an affirmation was fragile, and Thomas knew it. Hence his sheer interest in the development of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation housing section. Its presence and action would exemplify the movement of 'public opinion' that Thomas used to place housing within the province of the International Labour Organization. This was the basis for the 'Geneva project': the

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<sup>60</sup> Just like with the Italian delegates in 1922, this resolution might have been far from spontaneous.

<sup>61</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p. 580-582.

<sup>62</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p. 580.

idea that the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation housing section secretariat would be located in Geneva. This was a logical conclusion to the different schemes imagined since 1922 to place the Office in the centre of the 'public movement' for housing.<sup>63</sup> There is no trace of any official invitation that the Office leadership would have made to the 'housers' of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation, who were led by Thomas' old socialist friends. But Thomas was in Paris just before the 1928 conference of the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning, and the conference itself was attended by Pribram. Some insurance about close cooperation with the Office may have given the 'housers' the last push as they decided to split from the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation after just two years of acrimonious cohabitation. This did not bring the housing section to Geneva, but it provided the Office with the 'public opinion' partner it needed.

Pribram wrote a very complete report about those events. In Paris, the members of the housing section met and decided to launch a new independent organisation specialised in housing. This new group was to have its headquarters at Berlin or Frankfurt –*Stadtbaurat* Ernst May was present in Paris- , with additional financial support from national governments, municipalities and national housing organisations.<sup>64</sup> The establishment of the new association was assigned to a committee chaired by Wibaut and which included Vinck, Sellier, Klöti, Sjöstrand, and Kubista while Kampffmeyer was chosen as secretary. Pribram's report expressed no surprise about such development, and validated its righteousness by its numerous comments about the unwieldy aspects of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation Conference, its inability to reach reproducible conclusions and

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<sup>63</sup> ILO, W/1000/5/11, 'Minutes, Thomas' note 28 august 1928, Documents, Pribram report 17 July 1928.

<sup>64</sup> See financial documents in John Nolen Papers, box 7, f.2.

its lack of focus about the aspects of housing the Office was most interested in (financing possibilities, building techniques, tenant's rights). During the conference, Pribram in fact approached all the influent persons in the forthcoming organization. His report made it clear that cooperation had been discussed with precision, and that some agreements had been reached regarding the division of labor between the Office and the fledgling association. By and large, the Office would be in charge of documentation and research, with the assistance of committees of experts that the new housing association would organize around the most important issues (financial and technical problems, organisation of public housing agencies, legal aspects of tenant rights). The Office would gather the documentation and carry out the necessary research, based on which these committees were to deliver informed conclusions on best practices in the field of housing. Subsequently, the Office would be able to use these conclusions to frame recommendations and conventions to be submitted to the International Labour Conference. Such a configuration, concluded 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>65</sup> Thomas met with Wibaut during the summer to vet the agreement. This put an end to the 'Geneva project', which was replaced by collaboration with the new association.<sup>66</sup>

Such a collaboration was badly (?) by the Office, because some members of the Governing Body kept on raising concerns about the competencies of the ILO in housing matters. During the examination of the Office's report on Lall's resolution in October, and despite the workers' support of the Office's recommendation for new

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<sup>65</sup> ILO, W/1000/5/11, Documents, Pribram report 17 July 1928.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas also suggested to invite Kampffmeyer to Geneva at the expense of the Office, to establish cooperation on a firm footing.

studies and the possibility of a convention/recommendation, John Ballingal Forbes Watson, the director of the British National Confederation of Employers' Organizations, made his point very clearly. In his eyes, housing was a public health question, and therefore under the responsibility of the League of Nations. He also insisted that close contact should be kept with national governments as to the choice of experts collaborating on any new study.<sup>67</sup>

This was just a warning, as the Office's report was approved, and with it the ongoing studies and the idea of a possible presentation of housing issues to the Conference. A serious warning though, and the projects for a second volume on rural housing that would have extended beyond Europe were trimmed after this session, as a clear concession to the League of Nations interest in rural public health.<sup>68</sup> The Office nevertheless went ahead in 1928 and early 1929: the housing statistics conclusions were endorsed by the Statistical Union of Italian Cities, and by the Northern Countries Conference of Labour Statisticians and additional staff help was lent to Guye for his work on the European housing study. Guye was also sent to the first conference of the new housing organisation. Under the name of International Housing Association, it had installed its headquarters in Frankfurt, which at the time had the largest public housing program under the leadership of *Stadtbaurat* Ernst May and social democrat mayor Ludwig Landmann.<sup>69</sup> During the conference, Guye established the basis for an exchange of publications (including the reproduction of Guye's 'Housing chronicle' in the new organisation's journal), and close contact

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<sup>67</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administration, sessions 38-42*, Genève : BIT, 1928, p. 518-519.

<sup>68</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 15 August 1930.

<sup>69</sup> The invitation was mailed by Kampffmeyer to the Office, and Sjöstrand paid a visit to the Office just the day after, to present it orally.

between the two organisations.<sup>70</sup> A couple of months later, as Guye filed in a request for promotion with his superiors, he saw himself in charge of 'dividing the housing work between these two institutions'.<sup>71</sup>

The omen being good, Thomas and the Office led a further attack on the statistical front. In a report to the Governing Body he presented during the 45<sup>th</sup> session in June 1929, Thomas insisted on the success of the statistics study<sup>72</sup> and proposed that it should be the basis for a statisticians conference, similar to those the Office had organised about labour or migration statistics. The aim would be to suggest uniform statistical categories and practices, which would allow for a more accurate comparison between countries in order to have a better overview of the living conditions of the working population.<sup>73</sup> According to Thomas, preliminary contacts had been made with the representatives of national statistical agencies for such a conference in late 1929 or early 1930. During the discussion of this report, Thomas acknowledged that the International Institute of Statistics had postponed the examination of the housing statistics study until 1931<sup>74</sup>, but he urged the Governing Body to authorize the statisticians conference. Some Governing Body members then

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<sup>70</sup> ILO, W/8/1/1/01/1, Documents, Guye to Kampffmeyer 7 March 1929. Guye also attended the International Federation conference in Rome in September 1929, in order to keep good relations and connections with both networks.

<sup>71</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 30 April 1929.

<sup>72</sup> Considering the clippings that Guye included in his own claims for promotion within the Office, the book indeed received a wide acclaim. ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 15 August 1930.

<sup>73</sup> Bureau International du Travail, *Procès verbaux du Conseil d'administratio, sessions 43-46*, Genève : BIT, 1929, session 45 15 June 1929.

<sup>74</sup> The postponement was due to the extended dissenting views by many members of the 1927 committee as to the conclusions of Pribram's report, which was based on the Office's study. Many comments were about the 'urban and municipal' orientation of Pribram's perspectives. It seems that Pribram was anticipating these difficulties and others (e.g such as the interpretations of the term 'dwelling', as suggested by ILO, W 1000/2/7, Documents, Pribram to Lesoir, 3 August 1928). The report was initially to be submitted at the 1928 session of the Institute, and possibly this first postponement resulted from Pribram's attempts to rally dissenters. It would not be until 1936 that the Institute would officially create a 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, 1, 1936, p. 71-85, and his report Bertil Nyström 'Commission on Building and Housing Statistics. Preliminary Report' *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique / Review of the International Statistical Institute*, 6, 2, 1938, p. 251-263.

suggested until the endorsement of the Office's report by the International Institute of Statistics. Thomas resisted the idea, but he could not escape a new warning. Housing, repeated Forbes Watson, the British employers' delegate, was not into the purview of the Office. Forbes Watson said he would not object to a statisticians' conference, but it seemed clear to him that housing was under the responsibility of the League of Nations health section. Thomas however referred to article 396 of the Peace Treaty which placed housing within the Office's scope of activities, and the French union leader Jouhaux concurred. This warning transformed into a no go 6 months later. During the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Governing Body, the discussion was about a statistical conference on work accidents while Forbes Watson unexpectedly led the attack. He repeated his former arguments, and argued that the only housing aspect that the ILO was allowed to consider was itself to the kind of housing that was part of the labour contract (*'couchage'*). The verbatim notes, which were not reproduced integrally in the official minutes, mention that Thomas upheld his old argument about the Peace Treaty mandate and article 396, and said that he would come back to housing later during the session. This never happened. But no discussion about housing ever took place again in front of the Governing Body, nor during this session nor until Thomas' death in 1932.

After 1929, Thomas' reports to the International Labour Conference did not fail to underline the continuing growth of governmental housing policies as social policies. In 1930, the report stated that the Office was still gathering documentation and preparing for a conference on housing statistics, and in 1932 the Director supported a Japanese proposal to place housing on the agenda of a future session. But what happened behind the scene of the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the Governing Body seems to have thwarted any further development. In 1930, the Governing Body's official approval for

the continuation of the studies came after a remarkably brief report by the Office, which stated documentation about the extra European world being still incomplete and that the subject was not ripe for consideration. Only 'couchage' was subsequently placed on the agenda of the 1935 session of the Conference. There was no momentum any more.

The economic crisis and the Governing Body's position seem to have cooled down Thomas' enthusiasm, while he was exploring other themes like European integration and solutions to economic problems.<sup>75</sup> An exploration of the Office's archives reveals that housing had been *de facto* abandoned at the end of 1929. Guye's study, *La politique du logement en Europe: la construction d'habitations à bon marché*, was completed and published in 1930, and Guye began to work on wage statistics, a theme he would exclusively focus on after March 1931.<sup>76</sup> The Office stopped collecting documentation on housing, and the statistical section limited its investigations to the level of rents, an aspect that was considered appropriate to its mission.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, the League of Nations Health Organization was entering the field with decision. A housing report was prepared for the League sponsored European Conference on Rural Hygiene of 1931, and several volumes published in 1935 and 1936 on behalf of the League's Health Organization on the topics of urban and rural housing.<sup>78</sup> In parallel, the League Economic and Financial Organization began to pile up statistics about the construction business.<sup>79</sup> There is no direct trace of how the ILO leadership interpreted this new situation, but it appears that the ILO, a subsidiary of the League according to the Peace Treaty, was

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<sup>75</sup> See Denis Guérin, *Albert Thomas au BIT, 1920-1932. De l'internationalisme à l'Europe* Genève : Euryopa/Institut européen de l'Université de Genève, 1996, p.70 sqq.

<sup>76</sup> ILO, Guye staff file, Documents, memo by Guye to get a promotion to rank A, 1932.

<sup>77</sup> See *International Labour Review*, august 1933, june 1934 and May 1935, as well as the *ILO yearbook 1934-1935*, vol.II.

<sup>78</sup> Séries de la Société des nations, III, Hygiène, volume 3 (France), 5 (Pays-Bas) et 6 (Italie).

<sup>79</sup> See ILO archives, W 8/1 for the collaboration of the Office with the League on urban and rural housing studies in 1937.

not in a position to uphold its claims that housing was part of workers' conditions of living. In this sense, the end of the housing activities at the ILO and their development at the League were the symbol of the defeat of a coalition of socialist/municipal/voluntary associations by a liberal/state/governmental compact. The defeat of Thomas and his staff on the housing front, as well as those on the 'workers welfare' issues, signified the failure of their efforts to maximize the understanding of article 396 and 427 of the Peace Treaty, and to give the broadest possible range to the Office's mission related to 'conditions of industrial life and labour'.

### **Conclusion**

The history of this failure is but a clue of the larger issues and methods at play while the ILO tried to carve out its jurisdiction during its first years of existence, just as any new organization.<sup>80</sup> In fact, 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 seems to have considered that keeping in touch with 'semi public groups' and building from their commitment was a key to fortify the Office status, role and range. The groups 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, in order that the Office would be able to boldly explore new directions, new topics, new territories of social policies. As a result, the Office was proactive with many other international associations beyond the housing issue. In 1927, Thomas and his team were a force behind the establishment of the International Social Insurance Conference (Conférence internationale de la mutualité

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<sup>80</sup> Similar undertakings have been analyzed by Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore for different inter-governmental organizations created after WW2 (Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2004.

et des assurances sociales -CIMAS), which benefited from the material support of the Office. Adrien Tixier, the head of the Social Insurance section in the Office, was also the secretary of the new association.<sup>81</sup> Before that, Thomas had already been central in another associative operation. Before the First World War, Thomas had been a member or been associated with the International Association for Labour legislation, the International Association on Unemployment and the International Association for Social Insurances. He worked on their reconstruction since 1920, as he was convinced that their presence and propaganda would help the International Labour Organization at every stage of its fight for social reform, from agenda setting to the implementation of recommendations.<sup>82</sup> Subsequently, he pushed for their merger during several years, and eventually met success 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. From its headquarters in Basel (Switzerland), it was expected to support the International Labour Office all the more as several of its leaders were very close to the Office (as vice president Louis Varlez, the head of the Unemployment section of the Office)<sup>83</sup> or to Thomas himself (such as Adéodat Boissard). As mentioned in footnote 20, the Office also acted as steward to the Association Internationale de Service Social Industriel in 1922, and there might be other instances of similar relationships. In each of these situations, the idea was to harness the forces of 'public opinion' behind the staff of the International Labour Office as it tried to open new territories, to ease up the identification and solicitation of experts, and to establish the Office as a necessary clearing house of information

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<sup>81</sup> I owe this information and supporting material to Sandrine Kott.

<sup>82</sup> See Martin Fine, « Un instrument pour la réforme. L'Association Française pour le Progrès Social 1927-1-29 », *Le Mouvement Social*, 94, 1976, p.3-29.

<sup>83</sup> On Varlez's role, see Christian Topalov, *Naissance du chômeur*, Paris : Albin Michel, 1994 and Jasmien Van Daele, *Van Gent tot Genève. Louis Varlez. Een biografie* Gent : Academia Press, 2002.

and knowledge. The annual reports to the International Labour Conference, with their section on 'International Relations', bear witness of the continuing and intense relationship the Office was anxious to maintain with civil society groups. It was clearly expected that these connections would offer leverage against the hostility, roadblocks and checks on the Office's thrust towards reform. This was possible thanks to the variety of networks the Office was connected with from its origins, and which Thomas and his staff were in good command of. At the other end, the members and leaders of international voluntary associations were eager to get the Office's patronage, for material and symbolic reasons. It does not mean that they were not afraid of a possible vassalage, though. Thomas himself hinted to these misgivings when he told the 1925 International Labour Conference of the 'suspicion' of the members of the associations that were brought under the umbrella of the International Association for Social Progress. But the existence of common horizons, namely the belief in class cooperation with the objective of a pacified society and better welfare of the workers, as well as the memory of shared past experiences and fights (in political groups and issue networks) were enough to allow the Office and Thomas to play an important role as organizers of international nongovernmental life during the inter war period.