The Evolution of an International Library and Bibliographic Community

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The thesis of this paper is that the present far-reaching scope and variety of bibliographic and library activity at the international level, as manifested in the work of a great many different kinds of international organization, are possible only because of the emergence after the First World War of an international community that did not previously exist. It suggests why it was that, in our areas of professional interest, the League of Nations Organization for Intellectual Cooperation became the symbol of and the center for this community rather than the Palais Mondial or Mundaneum created by Paul Otlet and Henri LaFontaine in Brussels over twenty years before; for the Mundaneum may be described as a predecessor in many respects of the League of Nations Organization. From the point of view presented here, the League of Nations Organization was clearly a success, though it ultimately failed in most of the specific library and bibliographic tasks it undertook and was disbanded after years of relative impotence. The Palais Mondial, on the other hand, was clearly a failure, though some of the achievements of the International Institute of Bibliography, which was one of its component organizations, have had a lasting impact through the International Federation for Documentation into which the Institute developed.

The paper will have four parts. First I will examine the objectives and functions of international library and bibliographic organizations. Next I will analyze the idea of community; I will

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argue that the notion of a center is of paramount importance to its existence, and describe the present international library and bibliographic community. Third, I will discuss attempts by Otlet and LaFontaine to create a great international library and bibliographic center in Brussels before the First World War and describe how this grew in size and complexity to become what was called the Palais Mondial or Mundaneum. Finally, I shall discuss the League of Nations and the emergence of a center and a community that represent the beginning of our modern period of international bibliographic organization and control, indicating why the League Organization for Intellectual Cooperation transcended and perhaps displaced the organization in which Otlet and LaFontaine had invested their hope and so much of their work for a better world.

International Organizations

International organizations have proliferated during the twentieth century more than during any earlier period, and they have left practically no area of human endeavor untouched. Many necessarily have crystallized around activities that involve both the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Underlying the work of most international organizations in the latter area are a number of interconnected questions. How can knowledge be shared? What mechanisms can be devised to encourage and to regulate the transmission of knowledge internationally? How can effective use of knowledge be stimulated at the same time as its integrity is maintained and legitimate interests in it are protected? How can nations be encouraged to play their part in sharing with others the knowledge generated within their borders and expressed in their own languages? How can they be encouraged to deploy effectively for their national benefit potentially useful knowledge available to them outside their borders in languages other than their own?

Answers to these and similar questions are not simple, for they must penetrate the intricate web of cultural, economic, political, linguistic, and technological relations that constrain the intercourse of states and nations. Such questions, however, are simplified in practice in two ways: first, a concern for knowledge in its broadest, most abstract sense is replaced by a practical orientation toward providing information about what is known in limited subject areas; second, what is known in these subject areas is considered primarily to lie in the grasp of experts or to be recorded in documents. These documents still appear principally in printed form as books, journals, and reports, but they are also increasingly
assuming a nonprint form as films, audiodiscs and cassettes, and computer tapes and discs.

There are, then, international organizations devoted to the substantive development of our knowledge of the arts, humanities, social sciences, and the pure and applied sciences. These organizations attempt to achieve their goal by means of international meetings, cooperative research projects, the education of students, the international exchange of expert personnel, and publishing programs, either involving journals and books or indexing and abstracting services. This last activity, where it exists, brings the organizations concerned with the content of our knowledge into the realm of another group, which may be described as library or bibliographic organizations whose central concern is the dissemination or exploitation of that knowledge. These organizations are primarily interested on the one hand in the physical documents embodying what is known and on the other in the surrogates of various kinds, completeness, and intended uses (indexes or abstracts) that have been devised to facilitate the acquisition of different levels of knowledge about these documents.

Among functions falling within the purview of library and bibliographic international organizations are: (1) the lending and exchange of documentary materials; (2) the control of international commerce related to these materials (postal and tariff regulations, copyright agreements, publishing and distribution rights, and censorship); (3) the generation, standardization, exchange, and publication of machine-readable bibliographic data for books and nonbook materials and of indexing and abstracting data for journal articles and related materials; (4) the creation, maintenance, and operation of international information systems; (5) the provision of moral, technical, and financial assistance to developing countries utilizing existing documentary materials and information systems; (6) the publication of a technical literature necessary to the management of such international systems and agreements as exist; (7) the publication of a support literature consisting of general reports, manuals, directories, monographs, and proceedings about international desiderata, agreements, systems, and procedures, a literature that represents the deliberations of expert bodies or personnel about problems of international interest.1

The fulfillment of these functions is seen not merely as intrinsically desirable by those who create the organizations, but as related to a central value or good, the sharing of knowledge, whose nature and importance are supported by common beliefs. The
existence of these beliefs allows the international community to become a reality.

The Nature of Community

For a community to exist in the sense I mean there must be a relatively stable and permanent membership; there must be orderly, differentiated activity by members; there must be formal modes of communication; and there must be a center.

Membership implies the recognition of one or more common goals and a willingness to circumscribe the independence of organizational action in the service of these goals and objectives. Moreover, membership must be relatively stable and permanent if a community is to exist through time and allow its members variety and continuity of action within it. Orderliness and differentiation of activity are consequences of the independence of members, for in a community every member is different from every other and not every member can do the same, or yet entirely different, things; that is to say, cooperation is a prerequisite of community. For cooperation to be possible there must be accepted forms of regular communication. Among the purposes of communication are affirmation of common interests and negotiation by members about their activities as they relate to these interests. The center is an embodiment, which can be both symbolic and organizational, of these interests. Contact with the center is sought by members of the community as a source of support for and validation or legitimation of their communal activities. The purposes of the center are to initiate, encourage, focus, coordinate, and reward activity by members of the community it represents.

If this is a plausible description of a form of community, then it is proper to speak of an international bibliographic and library community. Its members, relatively stable and permanent, are predominately international organizations (themselves communities of individual, national, and other international organizational members). The existence and independence of these international organizations as members of the international community are represented by their statutes, rules of procedures, and carefully documented programs of work to which their own members formally subscribe.

These organizations are of different kinds and their work takes place to different degrees within the context provided by the international community. Some are nongovernmental, such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
(IFLA), the International Federation for Documentation (FID), and the International Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists (IAALD). Some are intergovernmental and are created for a single specific purpose, such as the Berne copyright union; others have a more general, amorphous function, such as the Information Policy Group of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Most intergovernmental organizations when they assume bibliographic responsibilities do so as part of a broader mission. In recent years, for example, a number of international information systems have been set up, such as INIS (the International Nuclear Information System) of the International Nuclear Energy Agency or AGRIS (Agricultural Information System) of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. A number of other systems with similarly acronymic names (DEVIS/ARCHISIST, for example) are under development. Because of the nature of their parent organizations, these systems represent especially stable services provided within the international library and information community. As a result of creating and maintaining these systems, the parent organizations, though previously not part of the community and though now the main thrust of their work may still be elsewhere, constitute an important part of this community.

Although the members or parts of the international bibliographic and library community are independent, all share common goals, seek to cooperate, and communicate regularly and formally. Above all, either they turn for direction to a common center, or this center deliberately reaches out to bring them within the orbit of its influence. The center nowadays is UNESCO.

While I do not propose to examine in detail the nature of the links with UNESCO that exist between the various international organizations constituting part of the membership of the international bibliographic and library community, any study of their work will at some point conduct one directly to UNESCO, and UNESCO will be seen as fulfilling one or more of the functions of a center that I have described: a source for initiating, encouraging, concentrating, coordinating, and rewarding work.

In practice, it seems clear that such a center can do little else beyond these functions. To be effective it must achieve its goals through the members of the community it represents. To undertake large-scale independent programs of substantive work would bring it into direct competition or conflict with other organizations; it could then be considered just another organization, and
the uniqueness of its central position in the international community would be jeopardized.

Thus far I have argued that it makes sense nowadays to speak of an international library and bibliographic community. Its members are international library and bibliographic organizations that are held together, in essence, by the existence of a common center that both is symbolic of a form of organization for the community and provides a basis for it. In the third part of my discussion, I want to take a historical leap to the turn of the century to study an attempt to achieve a version of this international center that, embracing bibliographic work and eventually much more as well, was intended to serve as the foundation for an international community. The attempt failed but was a prelude to the emergence after the First World War of such a center, which had the complex functions I have described, sponsored by the League of Nations.

The World Palace

In 1895 Paul Otlet and Henri LaFontaine founded the International Institute of Bibliography. Its aims were complex, but they turned on the development of a universal catalog and the creation of a classification system (which was eventually called the Universal Decimal Classification) that would allow for the cooperative compilation of the catalog by collaborators from around the world. The headquarters for the catalog was the International Office of Bibliography in Brussels, which was in part supported by the Belgian government (I shall henceforward speak of the International Institute of Bibliography as comprising without further distinction the International Office of Bibliography). While various ancillary technical and publicity functions were carried on in this headquarters, its central aim was the preparation and consultation of the universal catalog, which was no more and no less than an attempt to obtain bibliographic control over the entire spectrum of recorded knowledge.

Participation in the international bibliographic center that Otlet and LaFontaine created in Brussels was by and large predicated on contribution to the vast classified catalog growing inside it. An attempt was made, however, to stimulate the creation of national centers that would be linked to the international center. In these centers portions or even the whole of the catalog would be duplicated. The centers, in their turn, would attempt to collect and transmit to Brussels bibliographic data about the national literature. Thus consultation and use of the cooperatively assembled
central record of all knowledge known to be embodied in documents would be facilitated by a measure of decentralization. In the event only one national center of any scope or permanence emerged: the Bureau Biblioographique de Paris. The symbol of the work at the International Institute of Bibliography was its most important tool, the Universal Decimal Classification. It may well be no accident that it is this system that has always been most closely associated with the International Institute of Bibliography, eventually to become the International Federation for Documentation, and that in later years it was not uncommon for aficionados to make rather self-congratulatory references to the brotherhood of the "décimalistes."  

As the years went by, attempts were made to increase the range of activities and the effectiveness of the International Institute of Bibliography as an intellectual center. These attempts took several forms. New bibliographical works were developed and institutionalized: a form of encyclopedia comprising a vast collection of files of brochures and newspaper and magazine clippings, a catalog of pictorial material, and an international library were all arranged by the Universal Decimal Classification. The last was created by uniting the library collections of various national and international societies located in Brussels.

Another development was the subject offices founded within the secretariat of the Institute and supported by existing or specially created international associations. Within these offices attempts were made not merely to elaborate the bibliography of their subjects but to synthesize the content of a variety of documentary sources about them. There were offices for hunting, fishing, aeronautics, and polar regions; they seem to have had little effective life apart from the flurry of activity surrounding their creation.

Two attempts to obtain increased support for the center and extend its influence were directed to governments. First, Otlet was an active member of a commission appointed in 1906 to plan a huge architectural complex to house a number of Belgian cultural and artistic institutions in Brussels (the Mont des Arts), and he was able to gain recognition of the International Office of Bibliography as one of these institutions. Unfortunately the planning took decades to become a physical reality and by that time his influence in government circles had declined and the institutes under his care were no longer seen as having much, if any, national importance. Second, an attempt was made in 1908 through the good offices of the Belgian government to have the International
Institute of Bibliography raised to the status of an intergovernmental organization, by creating through governments an International Union for Documentation. Such an organization would by its very nature have a permanence, an assurance of support, and an international acceptance of its work hitherto lacking. The governments of the world responded to the Belgian initiative with a marked lack of enthusiasm and nothing came of it.

The last of the evolutions sustained by the International Institute of Bibliography that I wish to mention here was the creation of an international center of nongovernmental international organizations embracing all fields of knowledge. This was set up as the Union of International Associations after a world conference of these organizations on the occasion of the International Exhibition (or World’s Fair) in Brussels in 1910. To the existing bibliographical components of the center were added an international museum (its subject departments were to be maintained by appropriate international associations, its national sections by governments) and the secretariats of many of the associations. The organization of the center was completed immediately after the First World War by the foundation of what was misleadingly called an International University. All of these elements—universal catalog, “encyclopedia,” library, museum, secretariats, and university—were brought together at the expense of the Belgian government and housed by its leave in one of the huge buildings erected for the 1910 exhibition. This complex was given the name Palais Mondial (World Palace). Later the name was changed to a Latinate form, Mundaneum.

This was the state of affairs at the beginning of the period immediately after the First World War. I turn now to the fourth and final part of my discussion.

The League of Nations

The most important institution for the world of knowledge and learning after the war took an organizational form different from any that had preceded it. For many the war marked the end of the old order of international politics and diplomacy and the emergence of a new order in which the cooperation and to some degree the regulation of states and nations would be secured in a League of Nations. Perhaps no international body has ever had such hope invested in it. Among those who worked for its realization were some, like Otlet and LaFontaine, who believed its spheres of interest should encompass not merely political, juridical, and eco-
onomic matters but moral and intellectual ones as well. Expressed first at the meetings in Paris in 1919 at which the League's covenant was drawn up, this notion was then ignored. But in 1922 the Council of the League created an International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation and appointed to it twelve eminent scholars from a variety of disciplines and countries. Among their number were Marie Curie, Polish-French radiological scientist; Henri Bergson, French philosopher; Gilbert Murray, Australian-British classicist; George Hale, American astronomer; and Albert Einstein, German-Swiss physicist, who did not at once take his seat on the Committee.

From its inception the Committee received inadequate financial support from the League, and in 1924 the Council gave it permission to appeal directly to governments for assistance. The French government offered to create in Paris and in part maintain what would be an executive arm and headquarters organization for the Committee, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, frequently referred to as the Paris Institute. Together the Committee and the Institute, which was inaugurated in 1926, were known as the League Organization for Intellectual Cooperation.

Among a wide range of urgent work identified by the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation were the improvement of the conditions of intellectual life in the war-devastated areas of central Europe, the revision of existing agreements for the international exchange of publications and the protection of copyright, and the coordination of bibliography. In defining its preliminary program the Committee was guided both by the "peculiar urgency" of particular problems and by their capability for "relatively easy and immediate solution." It proceeded to set up subcommittees to facilitate discussion of problems and to identify specific activities to be attempted. Among these first subcommittees was one for bibliography, its membership comprising in equal proportions representatives of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation and outside library experts.

The question relevant to our discussion here is not why the League of Nations Committee on International Intellectual Cooperation was set up (which is a real and interesting question). Rather it is, why was an administrative center supported by the French government necessary? And why was it necessary for the League Committee to set up as one of its first subcommittees, an indication of the priority of the subject, a subcommittee on bibliography? After all, there in Brussels on the one hand was the Palais Mondial occupying locations supported by the Belgian
government, and on the other the Institute of Bibliography forming an important component of this organization and having members of various kinds scattered throughout the learned world.

Certainly Otlet and LaFontaine had hoped that the institutes of the Palais Mondial and the intellectual equipment they contained would be adopted by the League of Nations and elevated to the status of a technical organ for its work for intellectual cooperation, especially as a section of the League’s Covenant provided for the League to adopt existing international (governmental) organizations. And indeed, the League Communications and Transit Organization grew out of an existing organization, and another was intended to become the basis for the Health Organization, though the opposition of the United States prevented an unofficial agreement to this effect from being translated into action.

In the hope of gaining recognition and support from the newly created international body, Otlet had in its first days sought to draw the attention of League officials to the Palais Mondial and its work. There was much correspondence between Otlet and members of the League secretariat, including Sir Eric Drummond, the secretary general, who visited the Palais Mondial on several occasions. The Council of the League, however, was very careful in its dealings with Otlet and his colleagues. It responded to Otlet and LaFontaine’s overtures by what may be considered both caution and a ploy: it requested that the secretary general study the work of the Union of International Associations and report on it. The report was accurate and positive in tone but did not envisage any great role for the League in the Union’s work. Asked by Otlet and LaFontaine for subsidy for and patronage of the first session of the International University in 1920, the Council offered moral support and permission for members of the General Secretariat to participate in its meetings.

Otlet had vigorously urged the creation of an agency for intellectual work within the League both during and immediately after the First World War. Quite rightly, he saw himself as a leading proponent of the League Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. Once in existence, however, the Committee—even in the area of bibliography—having carefully studied the situation in Brussels, decided not to adopt the methods, programs, or secretariat of the International Institute of Bibliography. Rather it decided to confine to the Institute a series of partially subsidized tasks of a limited nature, and signed a formal agreement to this effect, which was never fully implemented. Otlet was bitterly disappointed when his institutes were, as he interpreted it, rejected by the
League, for, as he had been quick to point out, underlying the Palais Mondial was "the very conception of the League of Nations," and his criticisms of the early work of the Organization for Intellectual Cooperation were almost denunciatory.6

There are a variety of reasons why the League's Organization for Intellectual Cooperation went in different directions from the International Institute of Bibliography and the Union of International Associations. Some of them relate to the incompatible personalities in conflict and there was a great deal of this kind of conflict. But the most cogent reason was the isolation of the World Palace from the League, an isolation arising because the impossibility of the World Palace or any of its constituent organizations functioning as a true international center of the kind I described at the beginning of this paper.

From the outset the League Organization for Intellectual Cooperation had seen itself in just this way—as an agency to stimulate, facilitate, and coordinate work; an agency providing a forum for discussion, in which desiderata for international action could be formulated in close consultation with as many interested parties as possible. A major statement of the philosophy guiding the work of the League Organization was provided in 1927, six months after the International Institute in Paris had begun operation and a pattern to its activity had begun to emerge. The study of substantive matters related to the content of disciplines was explicitly eschewed. "The Organization is concerned with problems of organization alone. Its business is to find practical means of promoting international cooperation in the production and circulation of intellectual works." The statement goes on: "Further, the Organization will deal with all of these matters only so far as they are not already being dealt with by others; its particular role will be to encourage and help on the undertakings of interested bodies and, where necessary, to coordinate this action. Suggestion, encouragement, coordination to improve the conditions of intellectual labour: these are, and must be, the only duties of the Organization of Intellectual Cooperation." Moreover, early experience in the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation suggested that "most of the institutions and bodies with which the Organization has so far had dealings desired this systematic form of contact, found it an encouragement and a support . . . in brief, the new institution is a valuable rallying sign, and would be useful as such though it were useless otherwise."7

In line with these principles the Institute actively encouraged the formation of the International Federation of Library Asso-
ciations and supported its development in 1926 and later as an independent international organization through which library matters could be pursued at the international level. The League Organization also tried seriously over a long period and in a variety of ways to work out a collaborative arrangement with the International Research Council that was founded in Brussels in 1919 and reorganized to become the International Council of Scientific Unions in 1931. A formal agreement was not signed until 1937, though much in the way of informal consultation between the two bodies had by then already taken place. And, of course, there were the attempts to draw the International Institute of Bibliography into the Organization's network of contacts, meetings, and publications. Neither Otlet nor LaFontaine participated to any degree, but after the International Institute of Bibliography was restructured in 1924, limited but cordial relations were established in the late 1920s and during the 1930s between the Paris Institute and the new personnel of the IIB.

By way of contrast, Otlet presented two papers at the Prague conference in 1926 from which we generally date the birth of the IFLA, but did not in any way follow this initial association through. Much earlier, in 1919, before the League was active or its Intellectual Organization had come into existence, he had participated in the constitutive meeting of the International Research Council. He drew up draft statutes, which were accepted by the meeting, for an International Union of Documentation to be created from the IIB. This was to take its place beside the other new subject unions, such as the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry and the International Union of Astronomy. But again, he seems to have made no attempt to go beyond this result, and the International Research Council's published records show no further attempt to develop an International Union of Documentation from these draft statutes.

The curious dilemma faced by the Palais Mondial was that to become effective as an intellectual and international center in the new postwar world, it was necessary for it to surrender the work that the institutes comprising it had been performing for more than a quarter of a century. Participation in these institutes required a commitment to special programs and special methods, and many were opposed to the programs, the methods, and the philosophy that they embodied so imperfectly. Before the war these institutes—and the Palais Mondial as a whole—despite the conferences and articles and books and correspondence of their founders, were just other organizations struggling for survival in
an arena where there was little law and order, where there was not much cooperation and strength in association because there were so few shared beliefs; that is to say, there was not a community.

After the First World War, Otlet and his colleagues could not respond to the new order. They were universalists, centralists, tied to particular programs and methods rationalized in the headiest of abstractions that led them and their work to be mocked and rejected by many, or to become the objects of the passionate but usually ineffective conviction of a few.

The League Organization for Intellectual Cooperation, on the other hand, tried to identify and draw together what already existed into an international community, a task facilitated, as Otlet and the others were vitally aware, by the existence of the League of Nations itself, which was something quite new in the history of human association. Like its parent body, the Organization for Intellectual Cooperation was internationalist in orientation. It was committed necessarily to the independence of states and nations and of organizations and individuals, the cooperation of all of whom in different ways was its general object. Actual programs were formulated only after the closest consultation and involvement with the members of the community that the Organization represented and served.

Most of the programs were unsuccessful: the work on agreements for international exchanges of publications and the protection of copyright, the attempts to coordinate various kinds of subject bibliography, and the efforts to draw libraries into an international network all had to be resumed after World War II. Yet the situation at the end of the Second World War was quite different from that at the end of the first. None of the international bibliographic ventures that flourished in the period before the First World War survived it in a vigorous or lasting way. This is as true of the International Institute of Bibliography as it is of the Concilium Bibliographicum or the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature. Though—unlike the last two ventures—the International Institute of Bibliography's actual existence was maintained, it was forced gradually to relinquish much of what it had previously tried to do. It had to become a new organization, and ultimately only the organization itself—known as the FID—and the Universal Decimal Classification remained as the irreducible residue of its founders' ambitions. Yet after the Second World War there was an orderly and immediate resumption of what was universally accepted as interrupted work, of international relations between members of the international library and bibliographic community,
and the emergence in UNESCO of a center for that community that was similar in some ways to the one created by the League of Nations between the wars.

This is why I see our modern period of bibliographic organization and control at the international level as deriving from the creation through the League of Nations Organization for Intellectual Cooperation of an international library and bibliographic community and why, despite its failure in many of the tasks it undertook, I judge it a success. This is why, despite the survival of the FID and the UDC, I see the brave experiment begun in Brussels as the International Institute of Bibliography in 1895, and attaining an extraordinary extension and scope by 1914 as the Palais Mondial, as ultimately a grand but almost complete failure.

Notes


3. The information for this section of this paper is contained in W. Boyd Rayward, The Universe of Information: The Work of Paul Otlet for Documentation and International Organisation, Fédération Internationale de Documentation Publication no. 520 (Moscow: VINITI, 1975), passim.


7. The quotations are from: The International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (n.p., September 1927), pp. 10-11; the italics are in the original.