
The Italian origins of FAO and Paul Otlet

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Abstract:

Nowadays the strategic role of international organizations, which manage and provide information systems and library services in the agricultural domain, is universally recognized. This paper focuses on the origin of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) by presenting a critical edition of the Rapport by Paul Otlet to the marquis Cappelli, président de l'Institut International d'Agriculture (Otlet, 1911) that includes original documents and outlines the first steps taken by the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA), founded in Rome in 1905. The critical edition starts from the original report, preserved in the archival funds of David Lubin, owned by FAO archive and is a collation of IIA's memorandums preserved in the National Library of Rome, and the copious correspondence, between Otlet and Oscar Bolle, the delegate of Belgium, courteously made available by the Mundaneum.

Keywords: Paul Otlet, International Institute of Agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Introduction

Nowadays the strategic role of international organizations, which manage and provide information systems and library services in the agricultural domain, is universally recognized. The same role was fundamental also during the early years of the 20th century. When IIA was founded, one of the problems to solve, within the organization, was the management of information and bibliographical and documental resources, both at the local and international level. The study presented here, edited in 2013 by Roberto Guarasci, professor in Library and Information Science at the University of Calabria, and Maria Taverniti, research technologist at the Institute of Informatics and Telematics of the National Research Council, is the critical edition of the *Rapport présenté à monsieur le marquis Cappelli, président de l'Institut International d'Agriculture par monasieur Paul Otlet, secrétaire de l'Institut International de Bibliographie (IIB)*.

The Origin of FAO

Relations between Otlet and Italy begin in the early years of the twentieth century when IIA was founded by Vittorio Emanuele III, in June 1905, for the occasion on which the delegates of seventy-four nations sign the constitutional act of the Institute, that after WWII will become the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. It was the Jew-Polish David Lubin, transferred to US, who had the idea of creating the Institute. After reaching a good economic position by commercial activities, he decided to devote himself to agriculture and, particularly, to safeguard small holders of California, which at the time was in conflict with monopolistic cartels. He saw this scenario not so much as a loss for his or his friends' companies but more as a damage for the State and the democratic institutions. Soon Lubin was persuaded that the Institute had to spread in a large scale, from the national field to the international one. His first idea of an international intercropping of agricultural forces was presented at the International Agricultural Congress, in Budapest 1897, and he had no peace until IIA triumphed in Rome (Pantano, 1924). In December 1904, G. Montemartini wrote a long report addressed to the Treasury Minister, L. Luzzatti, and to the Prime Minister, G. Giolitti, in which he expressed in detail the reasons why before recommending to His Majesty Vittorio Emanuele III the promotion of an international conference, it was inappropriate trust in the seductive project presented by Lubin. On January 24, 1905, the king wrote to G. Giolitti, Prime Minister, proposing the idea of Lubin and assuming the creation of an Institute, free of any political aims, able to study the agricultural conditions in each country in the world, periodically reporting the quantity and the quality of the harvest and able to help with the production, reduce costs and make pricing affordable. Of such an Institute, which would help promoting solidarity among all farmers and powerful element of peace, the beneficial effects definitely would multiply (State Central Archive, 1905).

On March, 1905, a Primer Minister decree instituted a *temporary office within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs* that had to work synergistically with the Ministries of Agriculture and the Treasury. Two months later there was the first constitutional international conference of IIA, attended by the representations of forty nations but Lubin was not in any. Later he will be appointed US representative in the "Comité permanent" (The Italian delegation, appointed by Prime Minister decree (1905, May 2), consisted of Tommaso Tittoni, Minister of Foreign, Paolo Carcano, Treasury Minister, Luigi Rava, Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, Eugenio Faina, Giacomo Malvano, Luigi Luzzatti, Bruno Chimirri, Raffaele Cappelli, Edoardo Ottavi, Carlo Siemoni, Giovanni Montemartini, Matteo Pantaleoni). June 5, Giolitti's Cabinet organized a big reception in honor of the delegates, of more than two thousand people and a spectacular lighting around the Palatino. The Institute will be inaugurated in May 1908 in the building specially built in Rome, not without any difficulty, within Villa Borghese, an area made available by the Ministry of Agriculture, whose original ideal was to create there an experimental campus and a school of agriculture.

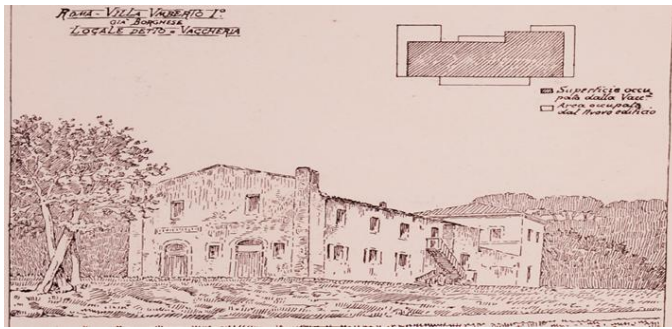


Figure 1. Rome, Villa Umberto I, already Villa Borghese (*Progetto di Convenzione per l'erezione del palazzo destinato a sede dell'Istituto Internazionale di Agricoltura. Relazione della Commissione Reale al consiglio comunale di Roma, 1906*)

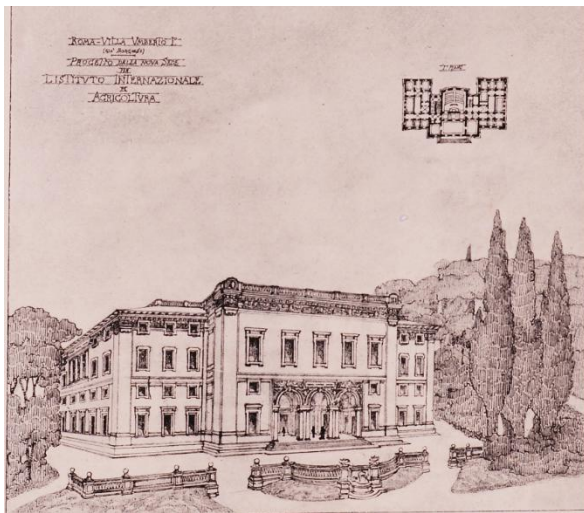


Figure 2. Rome, Villa Borghese, project of the IIA's headquarter

In 1908, IIA was inaugurated and in 1909 it began to operate with few scopes and in accordance with article n. 9 of the institutional agreement (Otlet, 1921):

Art. 9.
 L'Institut, bornant son action dans le domaine international devra :

- a) concentrer, étudier et publier dans le plus bref délai possible les renseignements statistiques, techniques ou économiques concernant la culture, les productions tant animale que végétale, le commerce des produits agricoles et les prix pratiqués sur les différents marchés ;
- b) communiquer aux intéressés, dans les mêmes conditions de rapidité, tous les renseignements dont il vient d'être parlé ;
- c) indiquer les salaires de la main-d'œuvre rurale ;
- d) faire connaître les nouvelles maladies des végétaux qui viendraient à paraître sur un point quelconque du globe, avec l'indication des territoires atteints, la marche de la maladie et, s'il est possible, les remèdes efficaces pour les combattre ;
- e) étudier les questions concernant la coopération, l'assurance et le crédit agricoles, sous toutes leurs formes, rassembler et publier les informations qui pourraient être utiles dans les différents pays à l'organisation d'œuvres de coopération, d'assurance et de crédit agricoles ;
- f) présenter, s'il y a lieu, à l'approbation des Gouvernements des mesures pour la protection des intérêts communs aux agriculteurs et pour l'amélioration de leurs conditions, après s'être préalablement entouré de tous les moyens d'information nécessaires tels que : voeux exprimés par les Congrès internationaux ou autres Congrès agricoles et de sciences appliquées à l'agriculture, Sociétés agricoles, Académies, Corps savants, etc.

Toutes les questions qui touchent les intérêts économiques, la législation et l'administration d'un Etat particulier devront être exclues de la compétence de l'Institut.

Figure 3. Article 9, IIA's Institutional agreement

IIA, Paul Otlet and the Classification

The senator E. Faina, already president of the Committee, was the first IIA president until February 28, 1910. After his resignation he was replaced by the marquis R. Cappelli, elected by acclamation of the permanent committee. Cappelli, in May started a deep reorganization of the institute appointing P. Jannaccone, statistician and professor of political economy at the University of Padova, as general secretary. One of his first problems was classifying the Institute's huge amount of documentation. On the one hand, he will say:

“Si toutefois la publication du Catalogue ainsi que des Bulletins bibliographiques subit quelque retard, c'est qu'il faut contrôler les travaux de classification effectués jusqu'à présent par le personnel de l'Institut, surtout en ce qui concerne certaines notations nouvelles relatives à des matières constituant la spécialité de notre Institut, notations qui ne sont pas comprises dans les tableaux généraux du Manuel de bibliographie universelle d'après le système de classification décimale. On avait prié à cet effet l'Institut International de Bibliographie de Bruxelles d'envoyer à Rome un de ses fonctionnaires, mais comme il aurait été impossible au dit Institut de satisfaire à notre désir avant le mois de mai, il a fallu lui adresser la liste des notations nouvelles en le priant de vouloir bien donner son avis sur les corrections qu'il pourrait être nécessaire d'y introduire“ (Comité Permanent de l'Institut international agriculture, 1910).

On the other hand, Otlet, explaining the unbreakable bond between IIA and the document information management, will say:

“Le Statut même de l'Institut le lie à la documentation, si bien que pour lui elle ne représente pas, comme il arrive pour d'autres institutions, quelques fonction complémentaire et accessoire. Elle est au contraire une attribution essentielle. La documentation est la fixation de la pensée par écrit“ (Otlet, 1921).

In December 1909, the *Assemblée Générale* made official, with a specific “proposition”, the collaboration between IIA and IIB adopting formally the *Classification documentaire internationale à notation décimale* and the system of *fiches bibliographiques analytiques*, used by IIB (*Rapports de l'Institut avec les Bureaux internationaux de bibliographie scientifique*, 1909; Rapport de M. Augustin Norero, 1909). The Decimal Classification was adopted by IIA that used it to classify and publish 43000 bibliographic notes and by its library through the subject catalogue of quite 70000 units (Otlet, 1921). The collaboration between Otlet and IIA is not separated from the Institute's purpose of promoting international cooperation, which in fact is its specific aim, the delegate of Belgium, Oscar Bolle, was the creator and promoter of these relationships. Two years later, in a letter from him to Otlet, he will say:

“J'ai compris que nous devons imposer les améliorations parce que notre personnel n'est pas enthousiaste d'une méthode qui lui est étrangère“ (Archives du Mundaneum, papiers personnels Paul Otlet, 1911). In 1921 speaking about the relation between IIA and the Classification Otlet will say: “La où une même personne doit fournir un travail continu à l'aide de nombreux documents, là surtout où plusieurs personnes doivent fournir en commune un tel travail, il est indispensable que règne le plus grand ordre. Tout document doit être assignés à une place et doit se voir rangé à cette place. [...] Il ne reste qu'à se servir de la Classification Décimale pour le classement universel international et à faire usage, parallèlement avec cette classification, mais seulement pour des publications ou pour leur préparation, de systématiques, plans ou tables des matières propres” (Otlet, 1921).

In early 1911, Otlet, invited by the president, went to IIA to collect material useful to write its first *Rapport*. It is a first set of recommendation of techniques and methodological references that the Institute's management team will accept not without some hesitation. In the catalogue of the Institute, preserved by the FAO's David Lubin Memorial Library, it was not possible to find the original manuscript of the Rapport of the 1911, but by the Mundaneum, Dossier n, 421, there is a typewritten document of May 1910, titled *Rapport Relatif à l'organisation et aux travaux de la bibliothèque*, with the side note "Institut International d'Agriculture, rapport [...] par m. Dop". It could effectively be a preliminary edition of the 1920's text commissioned by Dop, French delegate and vice president of IIA (Guarasci, Taverniti, 2013).

The recommendations contained in the first Report were not, however, to be applied easily, and in June, 1914 the Marquis Cappelli wrote again to the Director of the IIB communicating that:

"Le Comité permanent de l'IIA ayant décidé de faire appel à la collaboration d'un fonctionnaire de l'IIB de Bruxelles pour adapter un système de classification décimale aux exigences des divers services de l'Institut international d'Agriculture" (Archives du Mundaneum).

Before the formal request, an IIA's delegation driven by the General Secretary G. Lorenzoni stayed in Brussels. Also Otlet went to Rome more times to better understand the classification system in use and verify the real possibility of arriving to a classification in compliance with the Universal Decimal Classification (CDU) and preserving the specificity of criteria elaborated by the "Bureau des Renseignements Agricoles et des Maladies des Plantes". Then the bibliographic card of the Institute fed the Répertoire Bibliographique Universel, quite seven thousand cards in five copies for an amount of thirty-five thousand pieces (Camerani, 1936; De Gregori, 1963). The activity of the Institute will continue also during World War I and in November 1918 the marquis Cappelli will invite Otlet to come back in Rome. Two years later the general secretary C. Dragoni wrote about the bibliographic cards that IIA's library during the war had preserved two samples of cards to the IIB.

In March 1920, Otlet was again in Rome, called by IIA's president. Here he met, several times, the whole management structure, always assisted by Bolle. The aim of Otlet was to explicate in detail the relationship between IIA and information and documentation management because: "Le Statut même de l'Institut le lie à la documentation, si bien que pour lui elle ne représente pas, comme il arrive pour d'autres institutions, quelques fonction complémentaire et accessoire. Elle est au contraire une attribution essentielle". The product of this activity is well resumed in Otlet, *La Documentation en Agriculture, Rapport sur la mission à l'institut international d'agriculture de Rome*.

The second report, with regards to the first one, has the aspect of whom, invited to speak in the "Salle des séance de l'Institut à l'invitation du Comité Permanent" is not limited to the foreshadowing of solutions or the reassertion of the consolidated value of the documentation or the documental function, but speculates, through the information management, about a more active role of the Institution compared with the almost uncritical information dissemination hitherto done. It has a wider scope and presents a greater critical and methodological reflection on the discipline, presented in the second part of the report and also, even though Otlet denies it, the second report is the logical conclusion and the natural in-depth analysis of the first one. In fact, speaking about the classification tables made for the agriculture domain, he said:

“Dans le présent rapport je me suis beaucoup moins préoccupé d’être original que d’être vrai. [...]C’est dire que les conclusions ici présentées incorporent elles-même une grande partie des pratiques déjà suivies par les bureaux de l’Institut [...]. En ce cas le progrès doit consister à les généraliser et à les incorporer dans une méthode générale” (Otlet, 1921). The conclusion of the Introduction marks a milestone for the documentation in Agriculture and seems to announce the future: “Désormais on ne voudra plus étudier à fond une question agricole sans passer par Rome” (Otlet, 1921).

The end of IIA and the FAO’s birth

IIA formally ceased to exist on February 27, 1948. “Thus, the matter was decided by a very small margin, and in the small hours of the morning, since this plenary meeting of the Conference lasted until nearly 1.30 a.m. In the light of the final vote, the Conference formally accepted Italy’s offer of a site in or near Rome, subject to the conclusion of a suitable headquarters agreement with the central and local governments concerned, and it authorized Director-General Dodd to negotiate such agreements and to refer them to the Council for ratification” (*FAO: its origins, formation and evolution, 1945-1981*, 1981).

In November 1949 the General Conference of FAO – established in 1945 – designated Rome as headquarters of the organization and the library will merge with that of the Institute giving life to the David Lubin Memorial.

In details, some years later, in 1947, sources report that during an assembly the deputy Vincenzo Rivera – on the occasion of the vote concerning the dissolution of IIA – delivered a fervent speech to the Constituent Assembly in which he briefly recalled the history of the Institute and analyzed reasons that caused the end of its activities. At the same time, he hoped that Italy would continue to be the European headquarters of FAO, which would be established some years later, after WWII.

The Permanent Committee, which met on March 28, 1946, when the Quebec conference had already declared the dissolution of the institute, elected David McKendree Key – then counselor of US embassy in Rome – as president, and the Dane Van Haastert as vice president. Immediately after his election, the new president presented a memorandum to define the steps of the dissolution of the Institute and the transition of assets and competences to FAO, explaining, several times, that FAO was particularly interested in both the bibliographical and documental heritage of IIA and its skilled and trained staff.. The Institute formally ceased to exist on February 27, 1948. The following year FAO chose Rome as its headquarters (Rivera, 1947; Tosi, 1989).

Conclusion

When Otlet wrote the first report, in 1911, he had produced a significant amount of scientific work but nothing concerning the specific domain of agriculture. Thanks to this work he started to analyze and reflect on domain classification systems which he would go on to discuss in 1921 in the second report. The first report to IIA was about the state of the art of the management of the internal documentation and on the propositions of modification and optimization of methodologies adopted to face the urgent requests of specialized documentation coming from the members of the institute. The reference service and the Information and Documentation activities were of utmost importance, and almost came to be the only activities of the agricultural information services, contributing to populate the

publication of the “Bulletin Bibliographique hebdomadaire“ and the “Bulletin du Bureau des renseignements agricoles et des maladies des plantes“.

In March, 1910, to the “Bulletin du Bureau” the permanent committee entrusted a triple mission:

“1. Dépouiller la littérature agricole mondiale à l’effet de tenir les agriculteurs au courant[...] de tous les faits importants ou nouveaux d’ordre législatif, administratif, scientifique ou technique[...]; 2. Rédiger des monographies sur des matières spéciales; 3. Organiser un service chargé de répondre aux demandes des Gouvernements , des institutions scientifiques et, éventuellement, des particuliers“ (Comité Permanent de l’IIA).

The introduction to the *Rapport*, written by Pasquale Jannaccone, Secretary of the Institute, is emblematic of the ambivalent relationship between the scientific world and the Italian culture towards Otlet’s theories and offers the opportunity for a more general European digression on the application of the Universal Decimal Classification. The consultation of the “Giovanni Giolitti” and “Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri” archival funds, both preserved in the State Central Archive in Rome, allow to follow the birth and the life of IIA and to capture the insights of the political class that was able to understand the innovative value of the proposal and FAO/IIA’s strategic role.

Acknowledgments

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